**Ethics & Aesthetics**

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# Ethics & Aesthetics

by FragileTeacup

Summary

England, 1811. Social status is everything, and the obsession of every parent is to see their children married well. For twenty-year-old Omega Will Graham, life in a small Hertfordshire market town with his father, adopted mother and four half-sisters is tranquil, if a little dull. Until, that is, a party of strangers arrives in the neighbourhood, sending every mother within five miles into a frenzy of anticipation. For not only are the newcomers Alpha aristocracy, but one among them - Mr Hannibal Lecter - is the owner of the largest estate in Derbyshire... and single. A pity, then, that Will and Hannibal's first meeting is less than auspicious. But sometimes, fate and circumstance have a way of conspiring to bring together even the most stubborn of individuals...

Ethics & Aesthetics, a Regency A/B/O romance.

Notes

Pride & Prejudice is my all-time favourite novel. I've read it, taught it and watched every version of it. I live near Chatsworth House, which was used as Pemberley in the 2005 movie version... and it turns out that Jane Austen is my 6th cousin on my mother's side! And then there's Hannibal, the TV show which captured my heart utterly when it first aired and hasn't released me since. For a long while, I thought about writing a fusion of the two, but I was never sure whether or not to go for it. And then, in 2017, I was inspired by a very dear friend, Purefoysgirl, to just do it! And so, for more than a year and a half, I had the time of my life writing it. E&A includes illustrations by the enchanting theseavoices! See Chapters 5, 8, 10, 11, 14, 19 and 20! And her beautiful header is at the start of every chapter. By and large, the story follows the plot of P&P fairly closely, though there are a few surprises along the way. I hope with all my heart that you enjoy it!

NOTE: There is a podfic of E&A, created by the gloriously talented ghostgurlgamer, which you can find here. Thank you, lovely!

And a lovely reader, The___Calling, has translated the fic into Russian. You can find the translated text here.

# First Impressions

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single Alpha, in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a mate.

Nowhere was this truth so well fixed – and oft repeated – as within the walls of Wolf Manor, a household dominated by an Alpha woman whose sole aim in life was to get rid of her five children.

'Mr Graham,' shrieked the lady in question one Wednesday morning, 'have you heard that Muskrat Hall is let at last?'

Mr Graham and his son, Will, glanced at one another across the breakfast room table where both were enjoying a fine repast of red herrings, and rolled their eyes in unison.

'Will, I suggest that you take your morning ride now. No reason for both of us to suffer needlessly,' muttered Mr Graham, folding down his morning paper with an air of weary resignation as his good lady's footsteps echoed ever more loudly in the outer passage.

Dropping his knife and fork with a resounding clatter, Will pushed back his chair and rose with more haste than grace. 'Thank you, Father,' flashing a grin, 'for your most noble sacrifice.'

'Harrumph. Be off with you, child.'

Boots clattering over the cobbles of the courtyard - having availed himself of the escape route provided by the servants' entrance - Will found himself ambushed by his two most excitable sisters.

'Will, you will never guess!' cried Abigail, running across the yard, skirts billowing around her ankles as a fresh October breeze whipped them up. 'There is to be a ball at the Red Dragon Inn –'

'And our new neighbours are to attend!' exclaimed seventeen-year-old Fredricka, as usual several steps behind her boisterous sister and endeavouring to keep up.

'Save your breath to cool your porridge, Freddie,' scolded Abigail. '*I* shall tell Will.'

Will folded his arms and cocked his head to one side, eyeing his youngest sibling with fond exasperation. At fifteen, Abigail was a veritable handful of wilful Alpha precociousness. 'Well? Who are these paragons that they cause such a stir?'

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'Their family name is Verger,' recounted Will to the eldest Miss Graham some hours later, in the peaceful sanctuary of the summer house.' A brother and sister, recently arrived from the north of England. Self-made Alphas, by all accounts. And, according to Mama, each worth four or five thousand a year.' Pitch and volume increasing, he offered an uncanny and rather cruel impression of Mrs Graham. 'What a fine thing for our children!'

'Stop, Will.' Laughing despite herself, Alana nudged her brother's shoulder. 'But I do now understand why Mama is determined that we are all to be measured for new evening clothes.'

'New evening clothes?' Will grimaced. 'Father will be thrilled.'

'Father will understand that with five children unmarried, and an estate entailed away to a distant relation, needs must be met when such an opportunity presents itself,' replied Alana gently.

At almost three-and-twenty, the eldest Graham sibling was possessed of a calm understanding and wisdom that Will, nearly three years her junior, both admired and envied. Still, in one respect her words stung, although he knew that had been far from his sister's intention in uttering them. *'...an estate entailed away...'*

For Will, though bearing the name Graham, had come to do so only after his shy young Beta mother, ill and distraught, had come knocking at the front door of Wolf Manor to present a shocked

Mr Graham with the two-months-old product of a highly uncharacteristic drunken indiscretion. Despite the shame of his usually staid Beta father and the mortification of Mrs Graham, the ailing barmaid had been installed immediately in an upstairs bedchamber and a physician called to attend on her. Alas, little could be done for the consumptive creature, and after her passing Will had been handed into the care of a wet nurse and raised, at Mr Graham's insistence, as his and Mrs Graham's own. Mr Graham, delighted to have been granted a son under *any* circumstances, determined to lavish on his boy all the love in his heart for the rest of his days. As for *Mrs* Graham, the fact that a full two years passed between Will's arrival and the birth of Molly, the third of the five Graham siblings, spoke much of *her* feelings on the matter. Certainly it was a highly entertaining topic of conversation for the neighbouring gentry, several of whom indulged for years in regular, gleeful sessions of commiseration with the unfortunate woman. Will might have been destined to perpetual estrangement from his reluctant adopted mother, had not his tender, loving heart and sensitive nature prompted him to make overture after overture until Mrs Graham, worn out from her efforts to dislike the child, decided finally that it was much the easiest course to simply embrace him as her own.

Will's silence prompted his sister to place a comforting hand on his arm. 'I know what you are thinking and it is not your fault.'

'The fact that I presented as Omegan and therefore proved to be useless as both brother and son?' He picked moodily at the peeling paintwork of the bench. 'Mama might disagree.'

'Mama loves you and well you know it,' admonished Alana.

'She would have loved me better had I presented as an Alpha.'

'Will!' Alana frowned, a rarity enough for Will to feel slight shame over his moroseness. 'Yes, it is true that as an Alpha you would have been entitled to the inheritance of Father's estate. But you know very well that as a male Omega, your marriage prospects are far greater than those of the rest of us.'

'Oh come, Alana,' countered Will scornfully. 'You know very well that as an illegitimate son, my marriage prospects are materially damaged, coveted Omegan status or not. Who of good standing would wish to attach themselves to someone with such a scandalous past?'

'Scandalous past? You were born, that is all!'

Sighing, Will took hold of his sister's hand and squeezed it. 'Do not distress yourself. I am content, truly. I know that I am loved, Alana. And did Father not send me to the best schools? Not to mention Oxford.' A mischievous smile tugged at his lips.

'*That* you earned on your own merit,' said Alana, voice warm with pride. 'And to have been admitted a full year early! I am so pleased that you are to work in Uncle Crawford's law firm, Will. Just think, London!'

'After a twelvemonth helping Father modernise the estate,' Will reminded her. 'London will certainly be a challenge.'

'Which you will thrive on,' asserted Alana. 'Never have I known anyone as adaptable as you, dear brother.'

Will huffed a laugh. 'In this family, circumstances demand adaptability. Take Father, for instance.'

'What of him?'

'According to Abigail, he has been refusing to visit our new neighbours because it would require him to stir from his beloved library.'

'Heavens, Mama must be apoplectic!'

'Precisely.' He shook his head in amusement. 'Yet I wager that Father will have paid that call within a day.'

'Because it will please Mama?'

'Because it will restore relative peace and harmony to the household.' Will grinned. 'Adaptability, Alana.'

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To everyone's relief, Mr Graham did indeed pay the necessary introductory call on the Vergers, only a few days after having declared to his wife in solemn tones that he would not. Of course, the cost of this delay was long periods of woebegone screeching and scolding, but Will managed to avoid much of it by extending his morning rides to well past luncheon, a freedom to which his sisters, sadly, were not privy.

On the third such morning, he rode his grey stallion out a little further than usual, beyond the boundary of his father's land to a small lake, an isolated spot where, years before, Mr Graham had taught him the fundamentals of coarse fishing. Tying Winston's reins to a low-hanging branch beneath the ample shade of a willow tree, Will retrieved a bottle of lemonade from the small basket strapped to the saddle. Although now mid-October, summer was reluctant to relinquish her warm grasp on the country, and as the sun shone high and uninterrupted, Will was quick to shed his coat and neck cloth. Having unbuttoned his waistcoat and pulled off his boots, he sighed his satisfaction and settled back on the mossy bank to quench his thirst and take his fill of the tranquil scene.

He was thinking idly of the fly fishing expedition which he and Brian Price had planned for the following day when he detected a curiously familiar scent – fresh and earthy, with a mineral tang, as if suddenly he had been transported to his favourite stream and was standing immersed in the cool, delicious flow.

'Do you have trouble reading signs?'

Starting up from his half-recumbent position, Will whipped his head around, only narrowly avoiding spilling the contents of the bottle down his front as he located the source of the compelling scent and his eyes travelled up from a splendid pair of black knee-high boots, past tight-fitting faun breeches and linen greatcoat, to a high cravat framing a face of perturbingly severe, aristocratic beauty. Angular and haughty features were framed by a straight sweep of dark blonde hair, peeking out beneath a black high-crowned hat. The man exuded authority.

*Alpha.*

For an instant a peculiar feeling, part-recognition and part-yearning, washed over Will and he stilled. But then the stranger frowned and, suddenly mindful of his own dishevelled appearance, Will flushed and lowered his gaze.

'No,' he mumbled defensively, all thumbs as he attempted to re-button his waistcoat, finally giving up and scrambling to his feet.

Bare feet, Hannibal Lecter noted with disdain. To match the long sweep of pale skin exposed by the shirt which flapped open in a most distracting manner as the boy hastily brushed grass from his backside.

Opening his mouth to demand the boy's full attention, he closed it with a snap as he was struck by two things simultaneously. First, the delicate fragrance wafting from the boy, herby and sweet, which reminded Hannibal of the pine forests around his boyhood home. And secondly, the realisation that he was, for the first time in his life, face-to-face with that rarest and most coveted of social treasures: a male Omega. How he knew for certain, he could not have explained. Perhaps it was the boy's slight frame and delicate features; perhaps the blue fire in eyes alight with intelligence; or the delectable scent which wrapped around Hannibal’s senses like tendrils of silk thread, tugging sensuously. Whatever it was, his primal Alpha instincts strained towards it, eager to soak in the presence of so much Omegan beauty.

He removed his hat and tucked it under his arm in an unconscious act of chivalry, taking an involuntary step forward before stopping abruptly and, with ruthless self-control, quashing the strange feelings rising like a tide. Never in his life had he allowed himself to be a slave to his instincts, nor to be defined by status or gender, and he would not begin now. Besides, the fact remained that the boy – however alluring – was trespassing.

'Really?' he drawled, recovering his equilibrium. 'I beg to differ.' And pointing with one gloved hand to the large sign positioned on the adjacent bank, he waited for the inevitable apology.

Which never came.

'I have been coming here for years and never have I seen *that* before,' declared the boy dismissively, squinting slightly as he read aloud in a scornful tone, '*Private property: trespassers will be evicted.* Indeed? And for what, pray, will you be evicting *me*? The heinous crime of flattening grass blades while imbibing lemonade?'

For a moment Hannibal simply stared, dumbstruck, at the slip of an Omega who, in a clear, lilting voice had just spoken to him in a manner in which he had never before, in all his eight-and-twenty years, been addressed.

And suddenly he heard again his uncle's voice, laced with grief; saw the two of them standing together over his father's coffin: *'I know that you miss Lithuania, Hannibal. Dual heritage is never an easy thing to live with. But when your father inherited Ravenstag, he was determined that the family would no longer be split between two countries. He chose to settle in England because he wanted you and Mischa to have the best possible futures. Well, Ravenstag is yours now. But it is too big a burden for one person. It is time that you married. Find your equal; find your partner. Know. See.'*

*See.*

He blinked and the picture evaporated.

'Or poaching, perhaps,' he snapped, finding finally his own voice again.

The young imp had the effrontery to raise a delicately arched brow at this. 'Please, feel free to search me,' he scoffed, arms outstretched in brazen challenge. 'Though where you believe I have hidden the rod I cannot think.'

Hannibal, unfortunately, could, and the series of images that flashed unbidden through his mind as he contemplated conducting such an intimate search were enough to thoroughly discompose him. And so, for the first time in his life, he surrendered the field of battle.

'Troublesome child,' he growled, adjusting his gloves with excessive care. 'I have no more time to waste on you.'

What the Vergers saw in this godforsaken place he knew not, and for the thousandth time he cursed his inability to persuade his most intimate friends to choose an estate near his own, that he might have had a convenient escape from such country savages.

'You are not fond of eye contact, are you?' observed the boy cheekily as Hannibal turned away, the final irony being that for several hours afterwards he was unable to banish a haunting afterimage of wild, dark curls, round cheeks, full red lips and laughing blue eyes. And the faintest trace of sweet pine that lingered long after the image had faded.

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Another week passed in a blur of excitement - amongst the younger Graham siblings at least - in anticipation of the Red Dragon assembly. Will was rather less enthusiastic, for he had heard from more than one source that the Vergers and their friends had a collective reputation for being above their company. As they were by all accounts an exclusively Alphan party, this was no great surprise to anyone.

Nevertheless, he allowed his mother the pleasure of alternately wheedling and scolding him into the purchase of a new outfit: long-tailed blue coat, grey breeches and waistcoat. And on the evening of the ball, he was declared 'exceeding handsome' by Abigail and Fredricka.

As for the much-anticipated debut of the newcomers, increasingly wild rumours had been flying around the neighbourhood of the Vergers' intention to flood the assembly with guests – at one stage, the number nearing a highly improbable twenty. In fact, when the party entered the assembly room, it consisted of only five altogether: Mr Mason Verger and his younger sister Margot, their elder sister Mrs Cordell and her husband Mr Cordell, and another young man.

Standing near the back of the room with Mrs Graham, Alana, and Beverly and Brian Price (offspring of Sir James Price, the jovial Beta organiser of the evening's entertainment), Will was thankful of the distance afforded by his family's early arrival and the newcomers' lateness. For he had no wish of being publicly overwhelmed by the combined scents of a pack of unfamiliar Alphas.

That said, from such a distant vantage point he was unable to secure a clear view of the party, and so was forced to content himself with Beverly's characteristically tart appraisal.

'Mr Verger is handsome enough. He and his sister, Mrs Cordell, have an air of decided fashion.'

'Mr Cordell?'

'*Looks* the gentleman, but I fear he is a boor for he is already halfway down his second glass of wine.'

'Miss Verger has a pleasant countenance,' interjected Alana, colouring delicately as Will aimed a knowing look her way. 'I only mean that she appears to have easy, unaffected manners. And that makes her pleasant in general.'

It had long amazed Will that the two people to whom he was closest were both Betan. For Beverly and Alana could not have been more different – the former coolly analytical, even cynical in nature; the latter sweet-tempered and docile. They shared, however, an unswerving loyalty and protectiveness towards Will for which he was ever grateful.

'Hm. And what of the fifth member of the party? The one with the uncommon name?'

'Ah.' Beverly's voice lowered conspiratorially. 'You mean Mr Lecter? He is much handsomer than Mr Verger. And much richer.'

'Indeed he is,' gushed Mrs Graham, in rather louder tones. 'For Lady Price tells me that he has *ten thousand a year. And* a large estate in Derbyshire! To be sure, a most eligible Alpha.'

'Hush, Mama,' hissed Will. 'Here comes Sir James with one of them.'

Accompanying their bumbling, genial host was none other than Miss Verger. Will retreated to the rear of the group on the Alpha's approach, but he quickly discovered that he need not have worried. Her scent was light and delicate, like meadow grass, and apart from one curious glance as she took the measure of him, she paid no overt attention to Will. Indeed, if her eyes lingered on anyone it was Alana. Miss Verger smiled through the introductions and, to Will's pleasure, asked to stand up with Alana in the next two dances.

Watching them move together through the first dance, Will mused on how well their looks complemented each other. Both were fine-featured with dark hair fastened back, as was the fashion; Miss Verger's into a series of intricate plaits interwoven with purple ribbon to match her velvet gown, Alana's in a simple chignon with short curls released to frame her face.

Content to observe rather than participate, Will took a seat freshly vacated and frowned as his sensitive nostrils picked up the earthy, mineral scent that he had first encountered a week since. Surely it could not be...

Looking around, he received something of a shock when, catching sight of Miss Verger taking her leave of Alana, he saw her approach a horribly familiar figure standing nearby.

'Come, Hannibal,' chastised Miss Verger. 'Why do you insist on standing about by yourself in this stupid manner? You had much better dance.'

Aloof, hooded eyes regarded her with a scowl which Will remembered with disconcerting clarity from that day by the lake when he had first, apparently, met Hannibal Lecter.

'I certainly shall not. You know how I detest it. Besides, your siblings are engaged, and there is not another person in the room whom it would not be a punishment for me to stand up with.'

'Rude, Hannibal! Shockingly rude!' cried Miss Verger. 'And patently false. Why, I have just been dancing with Miss Graham and she is the most beautiful creature I ever beheld! And look, there is her brother sitting just behind you, who is very handsome and, I daresay, very agreeable.'

*He will not like that. The lion does not follow the lamb.*

Disconcerted, Will shook his head to banish the fanciful thought and focus on the issue at hand. Grateful as he was that Miss Verger had mentioned nothing of his Omegan status, he was dismayed to have been singled out at all. At any moment, the arrogant Mr Lecter would look his way and realise that he had already met Alana's 'handsome' and 'agreeable' brother. What would then follow was anyone's guess, but the prospect of a scene was dismaying to say the least.

Patience wearing dangerously thin, Hannibal turned to pour scorn on Margot's claims and found himself, to his intense chagrin, looking upon the blushing countenance of the impudent boy from the lake. Of course, it made sense of the fact that he had imagined catching traces of the Omega's sweet, fragrant scent on the air almost from the moment he had entered the room. But given what Hannibal had just learned of William Graham, the boy's presence was anything but welcome.

The lean, youthful lines of his body were tonight, admittedly, more suitably clad than during their first encounter – grey breeches and a fitted cutaway coat of deep blue, which matched the dark-fringed eyes now lowered in a show of demureness rather than flashing in bold defiance. Nevertheless, that full bottom lip drawn between small teeth was holding back an unmistakable smirk. Incredible, given the boy's history, the broad strokes of which had earlier been related to Mason and himself in a salacious whisper by, presumably, the town gossip, no doubt eager to curry favour with her new neighbours. As much as he despised such tactics, he despised smugness more and, still smarting from the Omega's insolence during their last encounter, Hannibal was determined to obliterate that damned smirk.

He looked at William Graham until, catching his eye, he withdrew his own and said coldly, 'He is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me.'

'But, Hannibal –'

'Margot, you should know by now that I am not predisposed to romantic whims. Nor am I in any humour to give consequence to the local gentry's by-blow.'

The stunned silence which followed this scornful pronouncement was broken only by the sharply indrawn breath of a clearly mortified Margot, who quitted him without another word.

Having been stung to speak more unguardedly – and much more cruelly – than he was usually wont to do, Hannibal was unable to resist glancing back at the target of his vitriol. He was surprised at the composure with which the boy held himself, although on closer inspection the bloom of colour had quite faded from those previously rosy cheeks. The sight prompted a curious tug in his chest and he turned sharply away.

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The following morning, the Red Dragon assembly was the main topic of conversation amongst the residents of Muskrat Hall.

'Country manners,' sneered Mason from his seat at the dining table, where he was greedily tucking into a large serving of grilled bone. 'I swear, if I had not just invested in a pack of foxhounds and freshly stocked the wine cellar, I would be off to town again in a moment. Season be damned!'

'Well, I feel no such dissatisfaction,' pronounced Margot cheerfully. 'I declare I have never met with pleasanter people in my life.'

'The eldest Miss Graham in particular, eh, Margot?' interjected Mrs Cordell slyly, while endeavouring to nudge her still-intoxicated husband awake with her foot beneath the table. He emitted several startled snorts and fell immediately back to dozing over his plate.

From his station by the window, Hannibal stiffened at the mention of the Graham name, but made no comment.

'Oh, indeed,' sighed Margot. 'She is an angel.'

'She is certainly a pretty little thing,' allowed her brother. 'What say you, Hannibal?'

'She smiles too much,' he muttered, though the offensive smile uppermost in *his* mind belonged not to the gentle Miss Graham but rather to her firebrand of a half-brother, a fact which infuriated him no end. 'And as for the rest, I saw little evidence of beauty, brains or fashion.'

'Ridiculous,' was Margot's dismissive pronouncement, whereupon Hannibal was left in no doubt of her continuing annoyance over his behaviour the previous evening. Attacking her soft-boiled egg with vigour, she added reprovingly, 'When we attend Sir James Price's house party, you would do well to look again at Mr Graham.'

'To what end?' he snapped, intensely irritated by his friend's refusal to let the subject drop.

'Well, I suppose one must allow that his Omegan status makes him at least semi-interesting, if, alas, still not quite respectable,' drawled Mason.

'He is by all accounts extremely intelligent and widely admired,' protested Margot.

'I saw neither pleasing symmetry nor grace in the boy,' lied Hannibal, turning back to the window, arms folded. 'In my opinion, he has hardly a good feature in his face.'

Ignoring Margot's frustrated sigh, Hannibal decided there and then that he would, indeed, take another look at William Graham. But only to further criticise and thereby teach his soft-hearted friend to attempt no more ill-conceived match-making.

Meanwhile, the matter was also under discussion at Wolf Manor, where Beverly and Brian were paying the obligatory post-ball visit.

'Poor Will – to be only just *tolerable*!' teased Brian. The Alpha pup bounced onto the newly-upholstered sofa, earning a glare from Mrs Graham, and subsided quickly.

'He is an odious man!' fumed Beverly. ‘Not handsome enough to dance with indeed! And as for his *other* comment - well, I cannot countenance such rudeness!’

'It is of little matter,' replied Will archly. 'We already knew him to be a proud, disagreeable sort and this merely confirms it.'

'Not that anyone else fared much better,' offered Alana, who invariably looked for the good in everyone, a trait Will often wondered at. 'Apparently, he spoke to hardly anyone all evening. But Miss Verger told me that he never speaks much in public. Perhaps he is shy.'

'Shy?' exclaimed Will sourly. 'Since when has that word ever applied to an Alpha?

'Since when have you bowed to generalisations?' countered Alana, gently reproving.

Will shrugged. 'Very well, then. I shall put it another way. If a determination to dislike everything and everybody can be so defined, then by all means, call him shy.'

'Well,' sniffed Mrs Graham, 'it is my opinion that to be *liked* by such a disagreeable man – rich Alpha or not – would be an even greater misfortune. Another time, Will, I would not dance with him even were he to ask you.'

This prompted a snort of laughter. 'I believe, Mama, I may safely promise you *never* to dance with Mr Lecter.'

In truth, although he was able to discuss the story with great spirit among his friends and family, Will had been greatly offended and, in a way that he could not explain, disappointed by Hannibal Lecter's behaviour. Still, his disposition always delighting in anything ridiculous, he quickly convinced himself that he could dismiss the incident – and the Alpha – as unworthy of further consideration.

# Unexpected Guests

The gathering at Sir James's was well-attended, with scarcely a seat to be found by the time the Graham family arrived. Will was greeted immediately by Beverly, and they sought a quiet corner of the drawing room from which to observe the various groupings with lively commentary. One interaction was of particular interest: Alana had been commandeered by Miss Verger and Mrs Cordell almost from the moment of her arrival and seated between them, though Will noted with satisfaction that most of the conversation seemed to be unfolding between Alana and Miss Verger.

Usually preferring to avoid large gatherings – and the occasionally obnoxious attentions of unfamiliar Alphas – Will had on this particular occasion agreed to make an exception only because Alana had entreated him to accompany her for moral support.

'That will require me to be sociable,' he had scowled, prompting a pleading look from his elder sister. 'Oh, very well. Just this once.'

Trepidation had made him unusually morose on the drive over, but walking into the drawing room he had picked up almost immediately on that strangely familiar earthy scent and felt his pounding heartbeat hitch before gradually slowing to its usual regular beat. It was Hannibal Lecter, of course – Will had quickly spotted him over on the far side of the room, engrossed in conversation with Mr Verger – and oh, how vexing it was that among all the Alphas present, it was that rude man's scent which dominated and drew him. And *calmed* him. But once he was satisfied that the Alpha was taking not a jot of notice of him, Will had allowed himself finally to relax fully and actually enjoy the evening.

'I believe that Alana is falling in love,' he confided to Beverly, as they watched his sister laugh delightedly at something Miss Verger had whispered to her, 'and I could not be happier for her. She has taken care of the rest of us for far too long, and I hope she will allow herself the freedom now to enjoy this.'

'Hm. She should secure Miss Verger's affections as soon as may be,' declared Beverly. 'There will be then be leisure enough for falling in love.'

'What an extraordinary statement!'

'Why?'

Will raised expressive brows at Beverly's cool response. 'Let us begin with the fact that they have known each other for all of three weeks.'

'Very well. But let us then consider the fact that, as a Beta, dearest Alana would be in a precarious position should Miss Verger chance upon an unmated Omega.'

'*I* am an unmated Omega,' Will reminded her crossly, taking care nevertheless to keep his voice low.

'And we must thank providence that neither of you is attracted to the other,' pronounced Beverly, entirely unruffled. 'But Alana may not be so lucky the next time. No, she should leave Miss Verger in no doubt as to her feelings.'

Will stared at her, still unsure whether she was in jest. 'Before she is even sure of them herself?'

'Of course! Will, you have spent half of your life with your nose buried in a book and the other half out riding, shooting or fishing. My education has been somewhat narrower yet it makes *me* the expert in this particular field.'

'Meaning?'

'That, as a Beta, observing is what I do. So please believe me when I say that in nine cases out of ten, a person had better show *more* affection even than they feel if they wish to be sure of – landing their fish, so to speak.'

'Become the lure?'

'Exactly.'

'And if such a strategy lands them a poor catch because they are ignorant of what precisely lies beneath the waters?'

'Will, from what I have seen, happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance, no matter how it is brought about or what the secondary genders of either party may be.' For a moment, Beverly looked almost sad. 'Perhaps Thomas Gray was right and ignorance really is bliss.'

Will shook his head, smiling faintly. 'You make me laugh, Beverly. I do not for one moment believe that you truly subscribe to that philosophy.'

'Well, we could enlist the opinion of another,' suggested Beverly, somewhat mystifyingly.

'By all means. Do you have a suggestion?'

At that, Beverly lowered her own voice. 'Perhaps Mr Lecter? He has, after all, been eavesdropping on our entire conversation.'

'He has?' Taken aback, Will looked up and started when his gaze immediately connected with Hannibal Lecter's. The Alpha had detached himself from Mr Verger, and the discovery of his unexpected proximity caused Will's cheeks to heat. Chagrined, he looked instantly away again. 'What can he mean by it?'

'Ask him,' prompted Beverly mischievously, and Will lifted his chin.

'Very well, I shall. I am not afraid of his glowering.'

Hannibal had come to the party determined to prove Margot entirely mistaken in her insistence that there was anything at all admirable about William Graham. Yet, watching him converse in animated fashion with his friend, Hannibal had found himself riveted by the beautiful expression of those blue eyes, which shone with a vivacity he seldom saw in those of his own circle. A famous Omegan trait, of course, and one to which he was usually immune. But in the case of this particular Omega, whose intoxicating scent had caught his attention upon the instant the boy had stepped warily across the threshold, Hannibal was swiftly learning that he could not predict his own responses.

Lost in reverie, he was caught unawares when the object of his fascination appeared suddenly at his side looking less than thrilled.

'Did not you think, Mr Lecter, that I expressed myself uncommonly well just now?'

Mindful of the unfortunate conclusion of their last encounter, yet determined to surrender no more ground to the difficult Omega, Hannibal hesitated a moment before replying.

'You were speaking of angling, though hopefully this time of the legitimate variety.'

'Did you just mock me?'

The boy folded his arms, looking torn between annoyance and reluctant amusement. Hannibal suppressed a smile.

'It was difficult to avoid.'

Before any rejoinder could be given, Sir James approached and clapped William Graham on the shoulder with so much enthusiasm, the boy almost staggered.

'My dear Will, your sister Molly has consented to play for the benefit of those who wish to dance. You will join them, I hope?'

'Oh yes, Will,' pressed Miss Price in a teasing manner, coming to stand at her father's side. 'Do join them.'

Absently noting the shortening of the boy's first name, Hannibal was about to excuse himself when Sir James addressed him with an expectant air.

'Mr Lecter, allow me to present this young man to you as a very desirable partner: Mr Graham of Wolf Manor.'

Unsure whether he or the boy was the more surprised, Hannibal bowed automatically and found himself saying, 'I would be pleased to be granted the honour of the first dance, Mr Graham.'

Dainty mouth falling open, Will Graham's reply was far less diplomatic. 'Indeed, sir, I have not the least intention of dancing. I do not find the pastime at all interesting.'

'Neither do I, in truth,' replied Hannibal, reluctant, for reasons passing his understanding, to let the matter drop. 'Yet my invitation stands.'

'There, Will, you see?' Sir James was positively hopping with glee, in a manner which Hannibal considered distinctly undignified in a person of his age and station. 'Mr Lecter has no objection to dancing with you, though he too dislikes the amusement in general.'

'Mr Lecter is all politeness.' And there it was again, that infernal smirk.

Before he could summon a suitable response, Hannibal found himself left to his own devices as Will Graham bowed stiffly and walked away, Sir James and his daughter following.

'What can you be thinking of? Let me guess,' drawled Mason from directly behind him.

'By all means,' murmured Hannibal, attention fixed still on Will Graham, who stood now by the pianoforte, engaged once again in conversation with Miss Price.

'You are considering with dread the passing of countless more evenings in the company of such common swine, yes?'

'No, my mind was more agreeably engaged,' countered Hannibal shortly, displeased by the indelicacy of Mason's language. 'I have been meditating on the very great pleasure which a pair of fine eyes in a pretty face can bestow.'

A telling pause followed, though Mason recovered rapidly enough to demand in a tone of forced lightheartedness, 'Indeed? And of whose eyes are you speaking?'

'Mr Graham.'

'Mr Graham!' repeated Mason, voice rising an octave. 'Why, Hannibal, when are we to wish you joy?'

Though covering his annoyance with a veneer of brittle humour, Mason was woefully easy to read. His growing partiality for his sister's dearest friend having been an open secret among their acquaintance for many months, it was nevertheless becoming tiresome, and Hannibal saw in Will Graham an excellent opportunity to quash it. That being said, he had no intention of being trapped inadvertently into any sort of ridiculous misunderstanding, and he chose his next words with care.

'Really, Mason, there is a great distinction between admiration and love; still more between love and matrimony. In this world, as you are well aware, the one has very little to do with the other.'

'No, no.' Stepping in front of Hannibal and blocking his view of the Omega – no doubt deliberately – Mason raised suggestive eyebrows. 'I consider the matter settled. You will have a charming mother-in-law; naturally she will be a regular guest at Ravenstag House.' Mason bared his teeth in what Hannibal fancied was meant to be a beguiling smile. 'And no matter Mr Graham's doubtful heritage. He will, I am sure, produce tolerably attractive offspring. Surely worth the risk of scandal and dishonour. Leaning forward, Mason added in hushed tones, 'I have to tell you, Hannibal, I admire enormously your willingness to take such a gamble with the ancient Lecter bloodline.'

As Hannibal had no intention of taking any such gamble, he allowed Mason's wit to flow unchecked, though annoyance tightened his lips, and his nerves snapped tight. This he attributed to Mason's endless infernal droning rather than to the efficacy of his taunts; nevertheless, he took care to avoid Will Graham for the remainder of the evening.

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On the morning of the eleventh of November, a letter arrived at the Graham residence addressed to Alana. It was from Miss Verger. Mrs Graham, in a flurry of excitement, demanded that it be read aloud, and her long-suffering eldest daughter immediately obliged.

*'My dear Friend,*

*It has been shamefully long since we all saw each other, the weather having been too inclement for excursions (and the roof of our carriage being in dire need of mending), and if you do not consent to dine with us today, I fear my brother and sister and I shall fall to quarrelling dreadfully. Please come if it is convenient.*

*Yours ever,*

*Margot Verger.'*

Alana's face was wreathed in smiles as she asked her mother, 'May I have the carriage?'

'No, my dear,' dismissed Mrs Graham instantly. 'You had better go on horseback, for it seems likely to rain, and then you must stay all night.'

Despite the mortified protests of both Alana and Will at such an outrageous scheme, their mother was not to be argued with. And Mr Graham, desirous only of the peace and solitude of his library, deferred to his wife's machinations with studied forbearance.

It *did* rain, huge drops lashing the windows all afternoon and well into the evening; and it became clear that even the elements had bowed to Mrs Graham's wishes, making it impossible for Alana to return that night. Will slept very little, concern for his sister's well-being preventing restful slumber; and when the next morning a note arrived from Alana, informing the family that she had fallen unwell and would be staying at Muskrat Hall for at least another day, he announced his intention to go to her.

'On Winston?' enquired his father, but Will shook his head.

'He needs shoeing again before I take him any great distance. No, I shall walk.'

'In all this dirt?' cried his mother, appalled. 'You will not be fit to be seen!'

'I will be fit to be seen by Alana, which is all that I care about,' retorted Will, and the matter was settled.

The day being unseasonably warm, and the three mile walk involving much jumping over stiles, wading through muddy fields and springing over puddles, Will was soon perspiring in his greatcoat. Halfway to the house, he gave in to the temptation to strip down to his shirt and breeches, bundling the discarded articles of clothing under his arm and resolving to make himself respectable again once Muskrat Hall was in view.

It was with a relieved sigh that he finally exchanged uneven meadow for tended lawn; and when just within sight of the house, he sank to the ground with a hot face and aching feet.

'Tell me, Mr Graham, do you have some particular objection to wearing clothes?'

*Not again!*

Hugging his knees to his chest, Will bit his lip, looked up into the stern face of Hannibal Lecter and endeavoured to think of something clever to say.

'I run hot.'

*Oh well.*

The Alpha frowned. 'I presume you have come to visit your sister.'

'I have.'

Awkwardly pulling on his crumpled waistcoat, Will wished ardently that the man towering over him with arms folded and boot tapping impatiently on the ground would at least grant him the consideration of looking away. But he continued to regard Will with the air of a scientist inspecting a particularly odd specimen.

'How is she?'

'She is not – that is to say –'

Will's heart lurched at the hesitance with which his question was met and he scrambled to his feet, anxiety dissipating his former state of self-consciousness.

'What? Is she very ill? Please tell me.'

Hannibal was silent for a few moments, torn between a deeply ingrained disapproval of the manner in which Will Graham cavorted – seemingly on a regular basis – around the countryside, and reluctant admiration for the glowing brilliancy which said cavorting had lent his complexion. Not to mention the alluring curve of his exposed throat, pulse fluttering beneath delicate skin at the base. But the worry clouding those blue eyes drew Hannibal's own gaze back up and prompted him to put aside all other considerations as he hastened to offer a more coherent reassurance.

'She has a fever and keeps to her room, but the apothecary has been sent for and I do not think there is significant cause for concern.'

The boy ran his hands through his hair and blew out a gust of breath. 'Thank you.' Tugging his lower lip between his teeth, he shook his head. 'Alana's constitution is strong but we should never have allowed her to attempt the journey on horseback in such weather.'

Unsure of how to respond to such unexpected openness, and distracted by the Omega's constant fidgeting, Hannibal indicated the path leading up to the house. 'It is this way. Allow me to take you to her.'

The rest of the journey was conducted in awkward silence, and Hannibal delivered the boy to his sister's room with a curt nod. Standing outside the door, he listened for a few moments to Miss Graham's hoarse exclamations of joy and her brother's affectionate responses, and thought with fondness – and some regret – of the sister he had left behind in London. He was pulled from his reverie by a plaintive cry of 'Please stay, Will' and frowned. The prospect of several days of enforced intimacy with the provoking wretch was not an appealing one.

The apothecary's visit was short but illuminating. Miss Graham had caught cold during her ride, and the treatment prescribed was rest and regular doses of strengthening draughts. Although Margot was eager to attend her, Hannibal was doubtful of the propriety of such a plan, given her growing attachment to the docile Beta. It was his wish to see Margot well-situated in her choice of spouse and, while bonding between Alphas and Betas was considered in general terms perfectly acceptable, for his dearest friend Hannibal wished something more.

The lesser of two evils was, therefore, to accede to Miss Graham's wish, that her brother might fill the role of nurse in Margot’s stead; and consequently a servant was dispatched to Wolf Manor to inform the Grahams of their son's intention to stay with his sister, and to bring back a supply of clothes.

***

A day's shooting did nothing to improve Hannibal's mood, having only Mason and Cordell for company. The former was in bad spirits throughout, for reasons which Hannibal could well surmise, while the latter complained constantly of the soreness of his head and the emptiness of his stomach.

'Is Mr Graham to join us?' asked a dour Mason as they all sat down to dinner, and Margot glared at him.

'Yes, of course. But he is occupied at present with Miss Graham - and you are not to say a word if he is late!'

'I have not the slightest intention of uttering one syllable more than is strictly necessary, I assure you,' huffed her brother.

The subject of their discussion arrived moments later, entering the dining parlour with, Hannibal thought with reluctant amusement, the air of one braced to face a firing squad. He had changed clothes, his own having arrived from Wolf Manor an hour since; and although his garb was somewhat plainer than that of the Muskrat Hall contingent, Hannibal had to admit that the simplicity of cut and colour – black and beige – suited the classic delicacy of his features.

Directed by Mason to sit beside Cordell at the furthest end of the table from Hannibal, the boy looked rather lost until Margot, seated opposite, greeted him kindly and enquired after Miss Graham.

'I fear she is unchanged,' he replied, adding with a grateful smile, 'but thankfully no worse. We are indebted to you for your kindness.'

'I am grieved that your poor sister suffers so,' said Mason, mouth full of pork. 'I cannot abide a cold. Indeed, I myself have suffered from several this season.'

'I too,' shuddered Mrs Cordell. 'Monstrous things. I am excessively wearied of them. Margot, dear, fumigation of the house may be a sensible precaution once Miss Graham is recovered.'

Hannibal winced inwardly. Conversation at the table was trial enough with these two, but to have their shallow self-centredness witnessed by Will Graham was oddly mortifying. To divert the attentions of the two opinionated Alphas from the boy whose lip was now curled in thinly veiled contempt, Hannibal engaged the duo in a lengthy account of his sister's most recent letter, and thus occupied them for the remainder of the meal.

After dinner the Omega, in predictably self-assured fashion – and without glancing at anyone save Margot – excused himself to return upstairs and sit with his sister. Annoyed by this obvious avoidance of his company, and irritated by his own annoyance, Hannibal paced the length of the drawing room in surly contemplation, while Mason and Mrs Cordell began a lengthy and enthusiastic diatribe on the many failings of Mr William Graham.

'No conversation nor manners. And as for his appearance this morning, why, he looked almost wild! Did not you think, Mason?'

'I did indeed. Nonsensical to have come at all, merely on account of a sister with a trifling cold.'

'Quite,' said Mrs Cordell, warming to the theme, 'and ruining his boots in the process. Six inches deep in mud, I will warrant.'

'Miss Graham's cold is hardly trifling,' protested Margot, seated beside Cordell who was already dozing off. 'And I thought Mr Graham looked remarkably well when he arrived. His dirty boots quite escaped my notice.'

'What say you, Hannibal?' asked Mason, with malicious challenge. 'Would you consider such behaviour acceptable in a relation of yours?'

'I would not,' he replied, though displeasure at being forced to participate in such petty discourse lent to his tone a clipped edge.

'Perhaps this event has affected your admiration of Mr Graham's fine eyes,' Mason pressed, with a knowing smirk.

Stopping mid-stride, Hannibal fixed him with a cold stare. 'Not at all. They were brightened by the exercise.'

As Mason busied himself turning a curious shade of puce, his eldest sister continued, unabashed.

'But really, Alana Graham is a sweet girl. Such a shame she could not have presented as Omegan; that privilege is rather wasted on her brother. And she has such low connections. Besides the brother!'

And the two eldest siblings laughed heartily at the mean-spirited joke.

'Their connections, whether high or low, make Mr and Miss Graham no less agreeable, surely!' Margot turned to Hannibal in appeal.

But this sentiment Hannibal could not support. 'The point, Margot, is that their chances of marrying well must be materially reduced. Particularly in the case of Mr Graham, who is the natural son of nobody knows whom.'

'Why should his origins matter to you if they do not signify with his family?'

Margot's frustration was apparent, and Hannibal felt no satisfaction as he delivered the riposte that he hoped would put an end to the debate once and for all.

'They matter a great deal when one considers that any person choosing to attach themselves to such a family would be forever tainted by association.'

Hannibal could only hope that Margot would hear the intended warning in his words and take care to avoid any serious romantic entanglement with the admittedly lovely Miss Graham. For he feared the repercussions to their friendship should more direct preventative measures become necessary. As for his own situation, Hannibal was under no illusions. As fascinating as he found Will Graham, he had no doubt that the attraction would soon pall. For no passing fancy could possibly compete with his loyalty and devotion to the House of Lecter and a lineage stretching back more than seven hundred years.

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Two hours passed before Alana settled into a deep slumber, at which point Will could no longer justify delaying his return downstairs. Steeling himself just outside the drawing room, he squared his shoulders and entered, only to find the whole party engrossed in a game of cards.

'Will you join us, Mr Graham?' asked Mrs Cordell, with a distinct lack of enthusiasm.

He shook his head. 'No, thank you. I should not leave my sister unattended for too long, so pray excuse me. I shall do very well with a book.'

'A book?' echoed Mr Cordell blankly. 'How extraordinary.'

'Ah, you see, Cordell, Mr Graham is a great reader and takes no pleasure in anything else.'

Will hardly knew how to respond to Mr Verger's taunt with equanimity but he managed to reply calmly enough. 'I deserve neither such praise nor such censure. I am *not* a great reader and I take pleasure in *many* things.'

Feeling Hannibal Lecter's eyes upon him, Will turned away and began perusing a selection of books laid out on a small circular table.

'How I wish the library here were larger,' declared Mr Verger mournfully. 'But then Papa was never much of a reader. He preferred pigs to Pope.'

'Mason, when you build *your* house, I beg that you would take Ravenstag as your model. A lovelier estate never existed!' exclaimed Mrs Cordell.

'Indeed,' said Miss Verger, with a fond smile. 'Ravenstag House is a treasure. But it is, alas, unlikely to be copied with any success. Is not that so, Hannibal?'

'Ravenstag is the work of many generations,' he replied, shuffling the deck, and Will caught the note of quiet pride in his voice. 'It would not be easily replicated.'

'I look forward very much to seeing Mischa again. Hannibal's sister,' explained Miss Verger in an aside to Will, who had drawn near to observe the game, finding the conversation unexpectedly more diverting than the books.

'Oh, Mischa! Was ever there a more delightful girl? And *so* accomplished!' cried Mrs Cordell.

'Hm. In my opinion, the term is too often applied,' said Hannibal Lecter dismissively. 'I know perhaps half-a-dozen among my acquaintance who are truly accomplished.'

'Then your standards must be very exacting,' Will could not resist commenting.

In return he received a cool stare. 'They are.'

'To be really accomplished,' drawled Mr Verger, 'one must have a thorough knowledge of music, dancing, gaming and the modern languages. And besides all this, one must have a certain something in one's tone, address and manner of walking. Is there aught I have forgotten, Hannibal?'

'Certainly of as much importance as anything is the improvement of one's mind by extensive reading,' offered his friend, dealing out the next hand.

Refusing on principle to back down, Will cast a scornful glance first at the pile of rejected books and then back at Hannibal Lecter. 'I have to say I am no longer surprised at your having only *six* accomplished acquaintances. I rather wonder now at your having *any.*'

'You doubt even the possibility?' Leaning forward in his seat, the Alpha fixed shrewd eyes on Will. 'Tell me, Mr Graham, have always you been so cynical?'

'Have always *you* been so dogmatic?' Chin raised in challenge, Will met Hannibal Lecter's intimidating amber gaze unflinchingly.

'I say,' exclaimed Mr Cordell, apparently either completely unaware or completely uncaring of the battle of wills taking place in his midst, 'this is no way to conduct a game! Look to your cards, will you, please?'

'Pray excuse me.' Seizing the opportunity to escape, Will bowed to Miss Verger. 'I should return to Alana.'

But even after he had left the room, he had the oddest sensation that eyes as dark as shadows still followed him.

# Conversations

The gardens, though stripped of their summer splendour, nevertheless offered the opportunity for long walks along pleasant avenues. Down one of these avenues strolled Will, breathing the crisp, clear air with enjoyment and relishing the crunch of leaves and gravel beneath his boots on the morning of his first full day at Muskrat Hall. He turned a corner and found himself in a tranquil oasis surrounded by high beech hedges, central to which was a small ornamental pond. Will stopped and sat down on one of the surrounding curved stone benches, glad of the chance to collect his thoughts. Peering into the water, he caught a glimpse of plump red koi moving sluggishly

between wan lily pads turned brown and paper-thin by the changing season. But for the most part, the murky depths seemed devoid of life.

'Before me things create were none, save things eternal, and eternal I shall endure,' he murmured.

'All hope abandon, ye who enter here?'

Jerking his head up, Will stared in dismay at Hannibal Lecter, who stood at the entrance to the grove with hands clasped behind his back, regarding Will with undisguised amusement.

'Is the situation really so very bleak, Mr Graham?'

'My thoughts are my own, sir. Please do not attempt to dissect them,' snapped Will, vexed to have been caught at a disadvantage yet again.

'*Your* thoughts? Dante's, surely.' To Will's discomfort, Hannibal Lecter seated himself on the opposing bench and looked at him expectantly.

Cocking his head to one side, Will pressed a finger to his lips and pretended to ponder for a moment. 'That sounds very much like an accusation of plagiarism. To impress whom, pray? The fish?'

A minuscule upward twitch at the corners of those sculpted lips softened the marble coldness of Hannibal Lecter's features, and Will felt himself responding, his impassioned Omegan nature drawn to the Alpha's controlled calm.

*How strange to be so identically different.*

'We are all God's creatures, so they say.'

'*They* say? But not you, Mr Lecter?'

'I prefer to keep my own counsel on such matters.'

Will heaved an exaggerated sigh. 'And there I was beginning to think that I might finally find you interesting.'

This deliberate provocation was met only with unblinking reserve. 'You still have not answered my question.'

'Imagine that.' Consulting his pocket watch, Will rose to his feet. 'I must attend my sister.'

'I commend you on your attentiveness.'

Will narrowed his eyes. 'Why do I doubt the sincerity of that statement?'

At this, the Alpha looked finally affronted. 'I do not know,' he replied slowly. 'But you should not. It is not my habit to bestow meaningless compliments, Mr Graham.'

'Really? In my experience, most compliments are just that.'

Will bowed smartly and walked away; and while he was a little ashamed of the rude manner in which he had quitted the scene, the part of him which had seethed at length over his humiliation at

the Red Dragon assembly was crowing now in triumph at having at last held his own against Hannibal Lecter.

***

Alana was still extremely weak; but to Will's relief, her fever appeared greatly reduced, and the visiting apothecary pronounced himself most satisfied with her progress. When at length Will left his sister, he sought with reluctance the master of the house, only to be informed that Mr Verger and Mr Lecter had gone to London on a matter of business and would be absent until nightfall. And so it was to Miss Verger whom Will applied for permission to send a note to Wolf Manor, informing the family of Alana's condition and desiring Mrs Graham to pay a visit in order to assess for herself the situation. This Miss Verger readily agreed to and the note was quickly dispatched. There was little else to occupy him once this small task had been accomplished; and feeling curiously listless, Will passed the remainder of the day in his sister's room.

Rising with the sun and finding most of the household still abed, Will seized the opportunity for another solitary walk about the grounds. All was silent and still and crisply bright, and he found himself drawn once more in the direction of the ornamental pond. He was strangely unsurprised to find Hannibal Lecter already seated there, head bent in rapt concentration as he sketched in pencil on a small pad.

Will debated whether to turn around and retreat, but curiosity stayed his feet. And a moment later, the man whom he had heretofore considered only as an adversary said pleasantly, without lifting his head, 'Good morning, Mr Graham. Will not you join me?'

He hesitated before crossing to the bench he had occupied the previous day.

'Was your business in town concluded satisfactorily?' he asked once seated, for want of a better subject.

'It was,' came the nonchalant reply. 'And your sister? How does Miss Graham?'

Will watched as long, elegant fingers moved over the paper with sure grace.

'The apothecary is confident of a full recovery. Our mother,' he could not resist adding, 'is due to visit later this morning.'

The pencil halted for a moment before resuming in a sweeping arc. Will hid a smile.

'May I ask what you are drawing?'

'Certainly. Please, see for yourself.'

Stretching out to take the proffered pad, Will felt a frisson of awareness as their fingers touched, and pulled back sharply. To cover his confusion, he busied himself studying the sketch of a domed cathedral against a clear sky.

'Il Duomo?' he ventured, and registered with complacency Hannibal Lecter's surprise.

'Indeed. Or, to use its proper title, Il Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore.'

'The Cathedral of Saint Mary of the Flower,' he translated slowly. 'It is a beautiful name. Are you drawing it from memory?'

'I am. I have found that memory can serve very well as a view. Have you visited Florence?'

Will shook his head. 'I should like to.' Wistful, he returned the sketch pad. 'Perhaps someday.'

'And what stands in your way now?'

A furrow formed between Will's brows. 'We are not all of equal means, sir.'

An awkward pause followed.

‘My apologies, Mr Graham. I did not mean to give offence.'

Recalling the last time he had given offence – and serious offence, at that – to Will Graham, Hannibal felt for the first time the full weight of remorse over the incident. No matter how insuperable the social barriers between them, Will had not deserved to be humiliated so.

*Will.*

When had he begun to think of the Omega in terms usually reserved for his most intimate acquaintance? Unwilling to follow that train of thought to its conclusion, Hannibal surfaced from his introspection and refocused on Will, who was regarding him from beneath lowered lashes.

'Perhaps you could tell me something of your travels there,' he muttered.

Rare was it for Hannibal to be surprised by anyone, yet once again this country boy had proven himself to be far from predictable.

'Of course,' he said at length. 'Of what would you like to hear first?'

Small, slender fingers curled around his delicate chin, elbow resting on his knee, Will proved to be a most attentive listener. Unlike Mason, whose habit it was to interject with distracting exclamations whenever Hannibal attempted to speak of anything at length, Will sat rapt and mostly silent. His comments, when he offered them, were astonishingly insightful – Omegas were reputed to be lively debaters but Will was something beyond.

'I think that I should prefer the Uffizi to the Royal Academy,' he mused, a faraway expression in his dark-fringed eyes, as if he were somehow seeing the small Florentine art gallery merely from Hannibal's description. 'A more intimate setting must surely allow for deeper contemplation of the art.'

'My favourite painting hangs in the Uffizi. La Primavera.' Hannibal smiled in indulgent remembrance. 'Since first seeing it as a boy I have been captivated by its melancholic beauty.'

'Each of us is possessed of a light and a dark side, do not you think?'

Hannibal hummed in agreement. 'Though I warrant not many among our acquaintance would be comfortable with such an assertion. I cannot imagine Mason earnestly contemplating his own dark side.'

Will's huff of laughter brought an answering smile to Hannibal's lips.

'Tell me, Mr Lecter, what is your opinion of the part Botticelli is thought to have played in the Bonfire of the Vanities?'

The way in which Will spoke of artistic interpretation and moral philosophy indicated a keenly empathic intellect, and Hannibal found himself relishing their conversation with an enjoyment he had seldom before experienced. It was with a start that he realised how much of the morning had passed when the church bell struck eleven.

Clearing his throat, he offered gruffly, 'Perhaps we should go back. If your family is expected -'

'Yes, of course.'

Fleetingly, Hannibal wondered whether the sudden softness in Will's eyes signalled affection for his family or regret for the termination of their conversation. The realisation that he wished it to be the latter perturbed him, and abruptly he stood, leading the way out of the park at a brisk pace.

Upon their return to the house they were met by Margot, who wore a harried expression. 'Mr Graham, I am glad you are returned. Your mother and sisters have arrived. They asked to be taken straight to Miss Graham.'

'Thank you,' said Will, cheeks a becoming shade of pink as he glanced sideways at Hannibal.

Wondering whether he could reasonably be excused the coming ordeal if he simply walked in a different direction, Hannibal felt the tentative hope die as Margot turned to him with a bright smile.

'Hannibal, perhaps you could wait with Mr Graham in the breakfast parlour.'

'Of course,' he replied, schooling his features to neutrality. 'Please,' stepping aside for Will to precede him into the small room.

Once inside, Hannibal took up a position by the fireplace and glanced uneasily at Will, the easy atmosphere of their earlier discourse evaporating within the stultifying atmosphere of the house. Feeling himself slipping back into stiff formality, Hannibal searched for an excuse to break the silence.

'No doubt Mrs Graham will be anxious for your and Miss Graham's return to Wolf Manor,' he commented finally.

'No doubt.' Pacing, Will issued a tight smile. 'Have no fear, Mr Lecter. I am sure we shall soon be on our way.'

Hannibal frowned. 'It was not my intention to suggest –'

'Ah, Will, *there* you are!'

Closing his mouth abruptly, Hannibal retreated to the window as into the parlour trouped Mrs Graham and her three younger daughters, followed closely by Margot and Mason.

'Our dear Alana is a great deal too ill to be moved,' pronounced the lady, sounding remarkably cheerful at the prospect.

'Of course she shall not be moved. My brother, I am sure, will not hear of it,' declared Margot.

'It is as my sister says, Madam,' said Mason with cold civility. 'Miss Graham shall remain here with us until she is fully recovered.'

'Well, well.' Mrs Graham nodded in apparent satisfaction. 'I cannot think of a pleasanter setting for Alana's recuperation. You will not think of quitting Muskrat Hall soon, I hope?'

'I really could not say,' replied Mason indolently. 'My decisions are usually sudden. I daresay that *if* I decided to quit the place, I should be off in five minutes.'

'That is exactly as I should have supposed,' commented Will dryly.

'You are a studier of character?' asked Margot, indicating a row of chairs, upon which the visitors promptly sat, and taking a seat herself on an adjacent sofa. 'How amusing.'

'Yes, but *intricate* characters are the *most* amusing. A pity they are so seldom to be found.'

Mason's look of outrage was lost on all but Hannibal. Torn between indignation at the impropriety of the Grahams' behaviour and continued admiration of Will's perceptiveness, he said distantly, 'Unsurprising, when one considers that in a country neighbourhood you must surely move in an unvarying society.'

This brought Will's eyes flashing to his own. 'Perhaps, yet you will own that people themselves vary constantly, whether they live in Finsbury – or Florence.'

The beginning of a smile froze on Hannibal's lips as Mrs Graham exclaimed, 'Indeed! I assure you there is quite as much of *that* going on in the country as in your fancy cities.'

Margot laughed uneasily, Mason smirked and Hannibal turned away, feigning a sudden fascination with the view of the grounds as he fought down his rising ire.

'Mama, you quite mistook Mr Lecter,' he heard Will chastise in a tone laced with embarrassment. 'He only meant that there is not such a variety of people to be met with in the country.'

'I am sure I do not know what you mean,' huffed Mrs Graham. 'Why, we dine with four and twenty families. I was saying so only yesterday to Sir James. Now *there* is a gentleman. Such a model of good breeding. And those persons who fancy themselves very important, and never open their mouths, quite mistake the matter.'

Nothing but concern for Margot – and, oddly, Will – prevented Hannibal from walking out then and there. He kept his countenance, however, and the topic shifted mercifully back to Miss Graham.

'Your eldest daughter is most amiable,' said Margot softly - too softly for Hannibal's liking.

'Ah, yes. I believe all our acquaintance envy me my dear Alana. She has many times been mistaken for an Omega, so great is her beauty. I often tell my other children they are nothing to *her*.'

Inwardly, Hannibal scorned such a sentiment. To be sure, Alana Graham was notably pretty, her features and shape pleasingly symmetrical; but where was the fire, the wit, the vivacity that was so compelling in her brother? Feeling unaccountably slighted on Will's behalf, Hannibal half-turned to look at the boy and reaffirm his belief in Mrs Graham's absurdity. Will stood by the hearth, hands clasped behind his back, head bent as he studied the patterns on the rug with apparent fascination. Thick lashes fanned across cheeks of peach-pinkness, the Omega's expression hidden by untameable curls which tumbled across his face. An urge to reach out and sweep his fingers through them overtook Hannibal, to the extent that he found himself actually moving forward, hand half-raised, and had to check himself sharply.

Meanwhile, Mrs Graham continued her relentless theme. 'A young man once wished to pay his addresses to her when we were staying at my brother Mr Crawford's house in town, though Alana was too young and it came to naught. Still, he wrote some very pretty verses on her.'

'And so ended his affection,' cut in Will impatiently, head jerking up. 'I wonder who first discovered the efficacy of poetry in driving away love!'

'Is not it considered the food of love?' countered Hannibal, alarm at his earlier impulse prompting him to seek distance in pointless disputation.

'I think that you are confusing poetry with music.' An unmistakable flash of mischief brightened the already impossible blue of those intelligent eyes, Will apparently not in the least put out by Hannibal's argumentative stance. 'At least, according to Mr Shakespeare.'

At this, Hannibal could not hold back a smile and, despite his misgivings, warmth tugged at him as Will returned the gesture.

'Mr Verger,' piped up Abigail, who had been sitting whispering with her sisters throughout the entire visit. 'May I ask you a question?'

Having quite forgotten Mason's presence, Hannibal was almost startled to hear the sulky reply issue from where the Alpha lurked behind his sister. 'Indeed.'

'We heard it said that you promised Sir James at the Red Dragon to give a ball here when you were settled. Is that so? Because if it is, then it would be most shameful scandalous of you to not keep your word.'

As Mrs Graham chuckled merrily – and Will hissed beneath his breath, 'Abigail!' – Hannibal watched Mason with amused curiosity. Really, he looked almost green at the prospect.

'Why, I –'

'Come, brother,' said Margot cheerfully, ‘there is no longer any reason to be coy. Miss Abigail, when your sister is recovered, you shall if you please name the very day of the ball. We would be delighted. Is not that so, Mason?'

'Hmph.'

As it had in fact been *Margot* who had made the promise to Sir James, Hannibal felt that Mason could perhaps be forgiven his pained bemusement.

Mrs Graham and her daughters departed shortly afterwards, Will returning instantly to his sister; and with the arrival of Mrs Cordell, Hannibal was forced to endure the tedium of Mason's mocking review of the entire visit.

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Not until evening could Will be persuaded by Alana to return downstairs, but eventually the prospect of studying more of Mr Verger's stubborn partiality in the face of Hannibal Lecter's pointed indifference proved irresistible.

*Hannibal.*

Uppermost in Will's mind as he entered the drawing room was their morning conversation: there had been between them such perfect synchronicity of thought, such harmony of sentiment. He had been... entranced. Yet when once again in company, he had sensed Hannibal's rapid withdrawal. His distance. Confused and hurt, Will felt nonetheless an increasingly helpless pull to the complicated Alpha.

*I shall simply have to build a fort around my feelings.*

Glancing around the room, Will found everyone actively employed. Mr Cordell, Mrs Cordell and Miss Verger were engrossed in a game of vingt-un; Hannibal was writing a letter; and Mr Verger, though ostensibly reading, appeared to be far more engaged by his friend's handwriting than by his own book.

'You write uncommonly fast.'

'You are mistaken. I write rather slowly.'

'Mr Graham, I am so pleased that you have joined us. How does your sister?' enquired Miss Verger, pausing in the act of choosing a card from the central stack.

'She is much recovered and sends her thanks for the basket of pears,' he replied, his own gratitude for Miss Verger's solicitude warming his voice.

Lifting his head, Hannibal caught Will's eye and smiled briefly before returning once more to his letter. Feeling his cheeks heating, and aware of Mr Verger's narrow-eyed stare, Will wandered over to the book table.

'No doubt that is why your penmanship is so elegant,' continued Mr Verger, as if his sister and Will had not spoken.

'It has less to do with his penmanship than with his eternal search for the perfect metaphor,' commented Miss Verger. 'Is not that so, Hannibal?'

Will, poring over an atlas, looked up to gauge Hannibal's reaction to his friend's teasing.

'Though you are prone to exaggeration, I will admit that my style is unique,' came the unruffled reply.

'As is Margot's,' sniggered Mr Verger, 'though I am sure she will own that *her* hallmark is carelessness.'

'My ideas flow so rapidly that I have not time to express them all,' she sighed, laying down her hand.

'An indirect boast if ever I heard one,' commented Hannibal.

'How so, when I am admitting my brother's charge?'

'You are admitting only to rapidity of thought, which is suggestive of enviable intelligence.'

'Well, how very cunning of me!'

Upon seeing that Miss Verger, though smiling, was clearly embarrassed, Will clicked his tongue in annoyance. This was the Hannibal whom he had encountered at the Red Dragon assembly – proud and arrogant – and the unpleasant reminder prompted him to speak up in a tone bordering on outright rudeness.

'Whereas claiming a unique style is an exercise in modesty?'

Laying his pen gently on the blotter beside his unfinished letter, Hannibal turned in his chair and directed a piercing stare at Will. Whether of anger or admiration, Will could not tell, but his heart beat faster as their gazes held.

'Is there something you wish to say, Mr Graham?' challenged Hannibal softly.

Swallowing, Will gathered his courage and lifted his chin. 'You appear to me, Mr Lecter, to be intent on fostering insecurity among your friends.'

'Really? Is that what I am doing?'

Head tilted, Hannibal continued to pin Will with a disturbingly intense stare that he felt powerless to escape.

'Sadly, that I *cannot* allow,' cried Miss Verger. 'Hannibal is a stalwart friend, truly, though from time to time it does please him to play the pedant. On such occasions he is, I admit, an awful object – at his own house especially, and of a Sunday evening, when he has nothing to do.'

Hannibal hummed in apparent amusement. But Will could see that he was rather offended, and checked his own urge to laugh. Still, he could not deny a certain rising satisfaction when he recalled his own past humiliation – far worse than Miss Verger's gentle teasing – at Hannibal's hands.

Doubtless to fill the sudden silence, Mr Verger called for a musical interlude, and Mrs Cordell promptly abandoned her cards and seated herself at the pianoforte.

'Do you play, Mr Graham?' asked Mr Verger, though his tone indicated a complete lack of interest in the answer.

'Aye, but only a very little.'

Mr Verger's smirk was annoying but predictable. Omegas were generally expected to excel at all the arts, yet somehow Will had never summoned the patience to hone his natural but raw talent. Nevertheless, he closed the atlas and wandered over to the instrument to look through a pile of music books which lay spread across its gleaming surface.

'Would you care to select something to play for us?'

Starting, Will once again silently cursed Hannibal's unique ability to move with disconcerting stealth. He straightened up and looked steadily back at the Alpha, whose proximity as he leaned across Will to sift through the collection of books flustered him more than he cared to admit, but he stood unflinching and made no reply.

'I said –'

'I heard what you said,' Will interrupted, 'but I was not certain how to frame my reply.'

'Explain,' came the imperious command.

Will folded his arms. 'Very well. If I said yes, you would no doubt despise my taste in music. If I said no, you would despise my neglect of etiquette. But you see, Mr Lecter, I have never cared a jot about the social graces.' He smiled, a dry, fleeting thing. 'No, I do not wish to play – and now despise me if you dare.'

'Indeed I do *not* dare.'

To Will's surprise, Hannibal bowed gallantly and returned to his writing desk.

*Every time I think that I understand him...*

Lips pursed in a rueful twist, Hannibal took up his pen again, though it was some minutes before he was able to regain his concentration. Never before had he encountered such a bewitching combination of sweetness and archness in one person. Never had he taken such pleasure merely at the sound of someone's voice, irrespective of what they were saying. And *never* had he been so attuned to one particular scent - so much so that he had been alerted to Will's presence several moments before the Omega had stepped through the doorway. He really believed that, were it not for the inferiority of Will's connections and his dubious heritage, he should be in some danger.

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Awaking to another fine yet cold morning, Hannibal emerged reluctantly from the warmth of his bed and rang for his valet. He stood by the window as he waited, looking out over the frost-encrusted lawn, and his gaze narrowed as a slight figure emerged from around the side of the house and ran across the grass.

It was Will. Barefoot, clad in a thin white shirt tucked loosely into breeches, he was waving a branch above his head and whistling. Moments later Hannibal understood why, when a large black dog bounded up and began circling Will playfully. A very familiar black dog.

'Ripper? What the deuce?'

Watching Will play in such a carefree manner with his beloved Great Dane filled Hannibal with a confusion of feelings. On the one hand, the total want of propriety demonstrated by the boy, who evidently thought nothing of frolicking half-naked on other people's lawns before breakfast, was unquestionably appalling. On the other... Rosy-cheeked, lithe and graceful, dark curls wild around his face, Will seemed the epitome of wanton beauty.

The arrival of his valet prompted Hannibal's hasty withdrawal from the window; and the next time he glanced out, dressed and coiffed and ready to begin the business of the day, there was no sign of either boy or dog. Nor did Will make an appearance at breakfast - choosing evidently to share a simple repast with Miss Graham in her room – and it was not until some hours later that Hannibal again encountered him.

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Taking the air with Mason usually provided an excellent opportunity for conversing about land management and livestock. This morning, however, the tiresome man seemed determined to be provoking by talking non-stop of Hannibal's supposed future union with Will Graham.

As they walked through the shrubbery, Mason commented slyly, 'Of course, the wedding breakfast will be a grand affair, but I hope you will teach your mother-in-law beforehand to hold her tongue, for I fear there will be no time for the speeches otherwise. And perhaps, while you are about it, you might endeavour to check your beloved Omega's tendency to impertinence. I am not sure it is a quality of which your uncle would approve.'

'You do not believe my Uncle Robert capable of engaging with a person of strong opinions? He is, after all, a judge.'

Of course, there was not the remotest possibility of his uncle ever even meeting Will, but if a little misdirection could put an end to Mason's tiresome prodding, then the effort would be well worth the reward.

'Well, yes,' sputtered Mason, 'and that is precisely why the Crawfords' portraits should be hung beside your uncle's in the gallery at Ravenstag. Mr Crawford is an attorney, you know, which is practically in the same line, although there is no room in Cheapside for great estates, more is the pity.'

'Have you any other advice to give?' asked Hannibal, wishing suddenly that he were sitting on a stone bench across from Will, describing his favourite chapel in Palermo and eliciting Will's opinion of Byzantine architecture, rather than listening to the senseless ramblings of a man whom, but for his connection to Hannibal's best friend, he should never have cared to know.

'Only that you should not even attempt to have your dear William's likeness taken, for what artist could do justice to those beautiful eyes?'

At that moment, around the end of the long beech walk appeared the owner of said beautiful eyes, expression wary as he acknowledged Hannibal and Mason with a slight bow. Beside Will – who was now properly attired, a fact for which Hannibal assured himself he was thankful – walked Mrs Cordell, who promptly abandoned her companion in favour of taking her brother's arm.

The path admitted only three and Hannibal, refusing to participate in such rudeness, dropped back immediately.

'This walk is not wide enough for all of us. We had better go into the avenue.'

Glancing at Will as he said this, and expecting at least a *show* of gratitude, he felt a swell of anger as Will laughed – actually *laughed* – and declared, 'No, no; do not change your plans on my account. You are so charmingly grouped, the aesthetic would be spoilt by admitting a fourth.' Adding breezily, as he aimed an arch glance at Hannibal, 'Goodbye.'

And as the unconscionable brat ran off, Ripper delivered the final insult by deserting his post at Hannibal's heel and loping after the boy.

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Gladly Will returned to the haven of Alana's room; and although his sister slept soundly through most of the remainder of the day, he contented himself with a book and settled with it in a corner window seat. Yet uppermost still in his mind was Hannibal Lecter and his disquieting shifts of mood. From antagonist to would-be friend to haughty gentleman; manipulative one moment, considerate the next.

*Who are you really? Why cannot I see you clearly? And why do I care so much?*

He was thankful when finally Alana awoke, cheeks a little less pale and eyes brightened considerably. Immediately, he put down his book and went to sit beside her.

‘You look much improved.’

‘I do feel better.’ With a grateful smile, she squeezed his hand. ‘Thank you for keeping me company. I regret that I have not been the most scintillating of companions.’

Will grimaced. ‘Believe me, your company, whether scintillating or silent, is a thousand times preferable to that of certain other individuals in this household.’

‘Oh, poor Will. But I am sure that soon I shall be fully recovered, and then we can return home.’

‘Do you feel well enough to pass an hour in the drawing room?’ He winked. ‘ I believe that Miss Verger is missing you terribly.’

Alana laughed softly. ‘Do not be ridiculous. I am sure that Miss Verger has far more important matters to think of than I.’

Will quirked a brow. ‘I am sure that she has not! Come, allow me to ring for a servant and send a message downstairs. You should not lie here wasting away like a tragic heroine.’

Acquiescing with a lightness of heart that Will was only too thankful to once again see, Alana offered one final piece of advice before sending him back downstairs for dinner.

‘Do not be afraid of them, Will. You are every bit as much the gentleman as any other beneath this roof. Believe that and you will perhaps not feel so inclined to defensiveness.’

How well Alana knew him! Perhaps provocation was not the wisest course, but in this unfamiliar environment Will felt his own vulnerability keenly. And a lifetime of fighting other people’s prejudices and misconceptions was not to be vanquished in such company as Muskrat Hall offered. At dinner, he ate little and spoke less, anxious to avoid both Mr Verger’s hostility and Hannibal’s displeasure by returning to Alana as soon as possible. But he need not have worried, for both Alphas ignored him throughout the meal. Indeed, Hannibal spoke only to Miss Verger, who was positively brimming with excitement at the prospect of Alana finally coming downstairs.

Consequently, there was a flurry of activity in the drawing room as preparations were made for the guest of honour’s imminent arrival. The fire was piled high with logs, the windows secured and all doors closed except the one leading out into the hall. All that was left then was for Will to escort his sister, dressed and happy if a little wan-looking, downstairs.

'Miss Graham, do come and sit here by the fire,' said Miss Verger with gentle concern. 'It is rather chilly this evening.'

'Thank you,' came the grateful response, and once seated the two ladies were soon wholly absorbed in quiet conversation, dark heads close together.

Will settled into a high-backed leather armchair on the opposite side of the room, leafing absently through his book as he watched the couple, a small smile playing about his lips. Until, that was, Mr

Verger took it into his head to tire of his own book, left his chair to walk about, and stopped unexpectedly beside Will.

'Mr Graham, let me persuade you to follow my example and take a turn about the room. I assure you it is very refreshing.'

From the corner of his eye, Will saw Hannibal look up from the unwieldy tome that he had been poring over since the moment Will and Alana had stepped through the doorway. Heart beating a little faster, Will closed his book and stood up.

'By all means.'

'Hannibal, would you care to join us?'

Hannibal shook his head. 'That would defeat the purpose, surely, Mason.'

'Meaning?'

'That either you wish to walk together because you are in each other's confidence, or because you are aware that your figures appear to the greatest advantage in walking. If the first, I should be completely in your way; if the second, I can admire you much better from my present position.'

Mrs Cordell and Mr Verger laughed heartily at this; Miss Verger and Alana smiled politely and immediately fell again to talking; Mr Cordell was asleep in the chair he seemed permanently to occupy and missed the entire exchange.

Will, entirely flustered, and unsure whether he was being mocked, levelled a glare at the Alpha, who returned his stare with cool challenge.

'Abominable!' cried Mr Verger, clearly utterly thrilled. 'How shall we punish him for such a speech? Feed him to the pigs, eh, Mr Graham?'

'Nothing so easy,' said Will, head cocked to one side as they stood side-by-side regarding Hannibal. 'Tease him, perhaps. Laugh at him.'

'I think not,' replied Mr Verger. 'Laughter without a subject is so very vulgar.'

'Mr Lecter is not to be laughed at? What a shame,' commented Will dryly.

At this, Hannibal snapped shut his book and rose from his chair. 'Am I to gather,' he asked silkily, prowling towards Will, 'that your first object in life is a joke?'

While Mr Verger immediately backed away, Will stood his ground, chin raised in scornful challenge.

'Certainly not,' he replied, 'though undoubtedly such people exist. I do not seek to ridicule the wise or the good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies – these are the elements of human nature which divert me. But I suppose *you* are without such weaknesses?'

Hannibal bared his teeth in what presumably was intended to pass for a smile for the benefit of those pretending not to watch the little scene unfold. 'It has been my intention to avoid those weaknesses which expose a strong understanding to ridicule.'

'Such as vanity?' Will shot back. 'And, perhaps, moral superiority?'

Amber eyes narrowed. 'Certainly preoccupation with aesthetics is a weakness. But morality? I would consider certainty of one's principles to be a virtue.'

'Oh, then you have no defect,' declared Will, eyes mirthful. 'You own it yourself without disguise.'

Taking another couple of steps towards the impudent Omega, Hannibal leaned in as if to impart a confidence. 'I have faults enough, Mr Graham, but they are not, I hope, of understanding. My temper is –'

'Unyielding?'

*Mocking boy.*

Another step. 'Precisely.'

'Intractable?'

And another, until the toes of their boots were practically touching. 'Most assuredly.'

'Resentful?'

Their faces were now so close, Hannibal felt the puff of breath from Will's lips ghost across his own.

'*Yes*.' A hiss. 'My good opinion, once lost, is lost forever.'

'Then Mr Verger is correct,' said Will, blue eyes suddenly serious again. 'For implacable resentment is not to be laughed at.'

'We each of us have the capacity for some particular evil,' mused Hannibal, gaze straying to Will's parted lips.

'And yours is an intractable belief in your own superiority,' scoffed Will.

'While *yours,*' replied Hannibal with grim emphasis, 'is a wilful disregard for the rules of civilised society.'

'Meaning what?' flared Will, eyes narrowing dangerously. 'That I do not belong in civilised society?'

'Will!' admonished Miss Graham, at which point Hannibal realised that the rest of the party had fallen silent and were watching the heated exchange with rapt interest.

'Do let us have a little music,' huffed Mason, looking now thoroughly put out. 'This bickering is wearisome.'

Turning abruptly away, Hannibal felt a rare gratitude for Mason's interruption. Surely he had learned by now that paying Will too much attention was folly and could easily be misinterpreted. Granted the boy's rebelliousness was seductive – when one had been brought up to believe unquestioningly in the sanctity of duty and honour before all else, the idea of freedom from such strictures was certainly appealing. But the manner in which they had just interacted had been

almost – intimate. And no matter how attractive were those long-lashed blue eyes, or the mind behind them, the idea that anyone might come to believe that the Omega held any sort of claim over him was unconscionable. Resolving therefore to keep his distance for the remainder of the Grahams' stay, Hannibal excused himself with curt politeness and left the room without so much as another glance in Will's direction.

# New Acquaintances

As a boy they had called him overly sensitive. Too able to pick up on the feelings of others. Too much affected by atmosphere and mood. The dark side of being Omegan, although of course no one had realised it at the time. His father and uncle, while Betan and Alphan respectively, had nevertheless done what they could to help him.

*'Why not try fishing, Will?' Mr Crawford suggested, after one particularly vindictive great-aunt, paying the Grahams a rare visit during Will's thirteenth year, was sent on her way after refusing to*

*sit at table with 'the little fey bastard'. 'Fishing is extremely beneficial to both body and mind. It will allow you space and freedom to clear your head.'*

*Mr Graham, upon his return from practically pushing the offensive woman back into her carriage, nodded sagely. 'Listen to your uncle, Will. He knows what he is about.'*

*'Would you teach me, Father?'*

*Placing a comforting hand on Will's shoulder, Mr Graham replied gruffly, 'Of course, my boy.'*

*And Uncle Crawford's eyes were kind on Will's distraught face. 'We both shall. Fishing, Will. That is the answer. And riding.'*

*'Bloom is accustomed to being ridden side-saddle,' Will sniffed. 'She is too skittish with me.'*

*'Which is why we have bought you a horse of your own,' Mr Graham told him with a gentle smile. 'Come out and meet him.'*

And so, between riding Winston and spending long hours either sitting patiently on the bank of a lake or standing waist-high in the cold waters of his favourite stream, Will had found excellent ways of coping with distress.

Neither of which he had access to in his current situation.

'Will, what it?'

Pacing restlessly in his sister's room, Will shook his head. 'Nothing. I – wish we could return home today, that is all.'

He could feel Alana's eyes on him, full of love and concern. 'How was breakfast?'

'I did not go down for breakfast.'

'Oh Will, why not?'

'He – they – do not want me.' Pushing a hand through his hair, Will sat down beside Alana on the edge of the bed. 'Could not we write to Mama to send the carriage?'

'She will not want to. You know Mama. She will be determined for us to stay full a week.' Alana's voice was softly sympathetic. 'He?'

Will looked down at his feet. 'Mr Lecter.'

Alana covered his hand with her own. 'Why do you think he does not want you here?'

'I can feel his disapproval. It radiates from him every time I draw near.'

'You were very teasing with him yesterday. Why?'

He shrugged. 'I was – adapting to my surroundings.'

'You were adapting to *him.*' Alana's eyes were shrewd on his face. 'I know you, little brother. You are very much like a chameleon in that way. But why so fierce?'

He turned to her then with a half-smile. 'If you were in a lion's den, would you fare better as another lion or as a lamb?'

Alana chuckled. 'Is that what Mama has done? Fed us to the lions?'

'Has not she?'

'I would say that you and Mr Lecter were evenly matched last night.'

'I think not,' muttered Will.

Perhaps the previous morning... But he was beginning to think that he had imagined the hours they had spent together in such perfect accord. How quickly afterwards Hannibal had reverted to his initial contempt. Even Will's Omegan status was not, it seemed, inducement enough for the disdainful Alpha to forgive his shameful past.

*By-blow.* The memory mocked his tentative hopes of friendship.

Alana placed her hand on Will's arm. 'Would you like me to ask the Vergers if we could borrow their carriage?'

The gratitude which rushed through Will at this suggestion was curtailed slightly when Miss Verger, upon hearing their petition over breakfast, begged Alana to defer their departure at least until the following morning.

'I then can be assured of your being quite fit to travel,' she said anxiously.

Alana cast a pleading look at Will who, sighing inwardly, gave a slight nod. He should, he supposed, take some responsibility for the tensions which had resurfaced between himself and Hannibal. He had sensed that the Alpha was unaccustomed to 'teasing', as Alana had put it, but had persevered anyway, needled by Hannibal's relapse into arrogance in the company of his friends. And, if he was to be completely honest, the sight of Mason Verger fawning over Hannibal in the shrubbery had sparked in him a feeling of discontent so sharp, his instinctive response had been to lash out, repaying Hannibal's chivalry with laughing scorn.

Perhaps if he attempted to relax his guard on this, their final day, he and Hannibal would be able to talk again as they had previously. It would be a pity to leave with only contention between them. Unaccustomed as he was to making new friends, Will was reluctant to relinquish this strange sense of kinship with the infuriating, intriguing, opinionated Alpha.

The men of the house having departed early for a day of shooting, and Mrs Cordell still abed with a headache, they were a small party and, Will considered, the happier for it. A quiet morning was spent reading; and after lunch, conscious that Alana was tiring, he watched with a smile as Miss Verger escorted her upstairs, before venturing outside.

It was a fine day for being outdoors: crisply cold, sun shining low in a blue sky, russet leaves crunching underfoot. The leaf-strewn lawn was empty, save for a single occupant: beneath the shade of a large old oak lay Ripper, gnawing on a stick. At Will's approach he bolted up onto all fours, head cocked expectantly. Will grinned.

'You look just like *him* when you do that. Leave you behind, did he?'

At first encounter, Will had presumed the Great Dane to belong to the Vergers. It was only upon returning to the house that he had learned from a passing footman the identity of the dog's owner. Realising that he had been playing rough and tumble with Hannibal's dog had been... disconcerting.

After a time spent wandering the gardens with the black dog panting vapour at his side, whimsy steered Will back to the shaded tranquility of the pond. Expecting to find there only the sleepy koi for additional company, he was full surprised to discover Hannibal sitting sketching, once more absorbed fully in his task.

Until, that was, Ripper took it upon himself to announce their presence with a series of ear-piercing barks, whereupon Hannibal looked up. For an instant, some unnameable emotion flitted across his face before his expression smoothed to careful blankness.

'Mr Graham.'

'Mr Lecter.' Hesitant, Will watched Ripper trot over to his master and settle at his feet. 'It was my understanding that you were out shooting today.'

'Was it?'

For a moment there was silence, broken only by the chimes of the church bell.

'Mr Verger and Mr Cordell?'

'Are out shooting.'

'Oh.' Taking a few steps forward, Will stopped again as he registered the tension emanating from Hannibal. It thrummed in the air between them and Will longed suddenly to dissipate it.

*This was partially my doing.*

'Is there something that I can help you with, Mr Graham?'

He felt with a shudder the cold steel of Hannibal's gaze and replied, with a measure of uncertainty, 'Alana and I shall be leaving tomorrow. If you have no objection, I would like very much to hear more of your travels in Italy before –'

But his voice trailed away as Hannibal rose, pad and pencil clenched in his hands.

'My apologies. I had not realised the hour. I beg you will excuse me.'

And bowing smartly, he walked away; though not, Will noticed with confusion, in the direction of the house.

Chest tightening with the pain of rejection, he slumped onto the nearest bench.

*Fool. This is what comes of attempting to make new friends.*

As if sensing Will's despondency, Ripper padded up and butted his thigh. He bent to pat the dog, blinking back tears. 'At least *you* have not abandoned me.'

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It was a subdued party that gathered for their final evening together. Miss Verger's spirits were decidedly low; and Alana, though she bore their prospective parting with her usual fortitude, was noticeably quieter than usual. Even Mr Verger was not unaffected by the coming separation; although Will was acidly amused to witness how, predictably, his Alpha host's emotions ran in the *opposite* direction of the others'. All through dinner, he talked most animatedly of his latest fancy pig procurement and his plans for creating an entirely new breed. The fact that he received no response at all save the occasional smile from Mrs Cordell discouraged him not a whit – indeed, the general lack of loquaciousness seemed encouragement enough for endless elucidation.

As for Hannibal, he seemed utterly determined to forget that Will even existed. This despite the fact that at one point during the evening they were left alone in the drawing room for full half an hour. But glare as he might at that sleek blonde head, Will could not provoke Hannibal to look up from his book. Will's initial feelings at being on the receiving end of such treatment – bewilderment, hurt, remorse over his own previous behaviour – soon gave way to burning indignation. And by the day's end, he was resolved to think of Hannibal only as the prideful antagonist of their first meeting. The moments of understanding which they had shared over the course of his stay had been mere fragments of time, too fragile to hold their shape.

Thus resigned, Will was wholly unsurprised when Hannibal failed to accompany the Vergers in taking leave of their houseguests the next morning. He could only imagine that Hannibal had decided to cut him because there was something about him more wrong and reprehensible, according to Hannibal's ideas of right, than in any other person. The supposition gave him fresh pain which he suppressed with grim fortitude. Such prejudice was not a new experience for him, nor would it in all likelihood be the last.

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'I hope, my dear,' said Mr Graham to his wife, as they were at breakfast the next morning, 'that you have ordered a good dinner today, because I have reason to expect an addition to our family party.'

The squeal which issued forth from the robust tonsils of Mrs Graham drew winces from all present. 'It is Miss Verger, I am sure! Why, Alana, you sly thing. To say not a word to your poor mama!'

'But I know of no such plan,' protested Alana, looking to Will in confusion.

He squeezed her hand and turned to Mr Graham. 'Father, do not tease. Who is it?'

'I shall first tell you who it is *not,*' replied Mr Graham, clearly enjoying himself. 'It is *not* Miss Verger. It is a gentleman and a stranger.'

'Is it an officer?' piped up Abigail, positively giddy with excitement.

Will rolled his eyes. Since the recent arrival of a militia regiment in the neighbourhood, all that Abigail and Fredricka could talk of were officers and red coats.

'No, child,' said Mr Graham witheringly. 'It is not an officer. But pray defer your disappointment until you have heard all.' And picking up a folded slip of paper from the table, he continued, 'A short while ago I received this letter. It is from my cousin, Mr Franklyn, who, when I am dead, may turn you all out of this house as soon as he pleases.'

'Oh, my dear!' cried Mrs Graham, face turning purple, 'Pray do not speak of that odious man! I do think it is the hardest thing in the world that your estate should be entailed away from your own

children.'

Will shook his head with a wry smile. 'It is hardly Mr Franklyn's doing, Mama. You know very well that by law only Alpha and Beta males are permitted to inherit property.'

'His writing to us is an impertinence,' she insisted stubbornly.

'Ah well,' sighed Mr Graham. 'Although it seems that nothing can clear Mr Franklyn from the guilt of inheriting Wolf Manor, I beg you would listen to his letter all the same.'

Eyes twinkling, he unfolded the paper and began reading.

*'Dear Sir,*

*I have wished for some time to heal the breach subsisting between yourself and my late, lamented, honoured father. Having had the misfortune to lose him, I made up my mind to proffer an olive-branch to your good self and your family.*

*Lately ordained into the Church, I have been so fortunate as to be looked on with favour by the Right Honourable Lady Bedelia du Maurier, who has granted me her patronage as well as a valuable living and the rectory of her family's parish.*

*I feel it my duty, in my new role, to promote peace and love in all, a sentiment of which I am sure my esteemed patroness would approve. Indeed, she has graciously granted me leave to visit you, and I hope to do so presently, arriving at your abode on Monday the eighteenth of November by four o'clock and departing twelve days afterwards, on the morning of Saturday the thirtieth of November, in all probability at around ten o'clock in the morning.*

*In conclusion, I wish to assure you that I come ready to make every possible amends to your amiable children – but of this I shall speak more when we are better acquainted.*

*I remain your friend,*

*F Franklyn.'*

Listening with ever-increasing incredulity, Will found himself feeling gratitude for the entertaining distraction which this unseen cousin promised to provide.

'What a pompous ass,' he derided, as Mr Graham looked around expectantly. 'How old is he?'

Mr Graham wrinkled his brow. 'I would say no more than five-and-twenty. Why do you ask?'

'He writes as someone of five-and-sixty,' snorted Will.

'Will Graham, that is quite enough,' chastised Mrs Graham, in a sharp about-face which quite surprised her youngest daughters, though Will and Alana exchanged knowing looks. 'If Mr Franklyn wishes to right the wrong done to your father then I will not say nay to him. And neither will you.'

'Yes, Mama,' he replied dutifully, and suppressed a smile when he caught his father's wink.

***

Mr Franklyn was everything that Will had hoped.

At precisely four o'clock, a public chaise drew up outside the house and out climbed a short, heavy-set young man with a neatly-trimmed black beard and mournful dark eyes. He bowed flamboyantly to the assembled family and was ushered promptly indoors by Mr Graham where, within five minutes of sitting down, their visitor pronounced that he had no doubt such a fine set of offspring would, in due time, be easily disposed of in marriage.

'In point of fact, Lady Bedelia has kindly condescended to advise *me* to marry as soon as possible,' he added with a sly wink, which Will noted with some alarm seemed to be directed at himself. 'But perhaps that is a subject best saved for another time. Now, let me guess.'

And looking at Alana, he exclaimed, 'Omegan!'

'I beg your pardon?' gasped the young lady, as Will clapped a hand over his mouth to hide his grin.

'No, wait... Alphan!'

Alana's cheeks were by now fiery red. 'Mr Franklyn, please!'

'No, no, do not tell me.' And pointing a finger straight across the dining table, he pronounced triumphantly, 'Betan. You are Betan, are not you?'

Snorting with laughter, Will rose with alacrity and grasped his mortified sister by the elbow. 'Come, Alana,' he choked, feigning a coughing fit as he bundled her towards the door. 'We are no doubt wanted about the mince pies.'

***

The only people who seemed at all to admire their odd guest were Molly and Mrs Graham. Molly had sighed in admiration over the stately composition of Mr Franklyn's introductory letter; and all through the interminable evening which followed dinner, she gazed at the peacocking fool in undisguised awe as he read aloud from Fordyce's Sermons, while the younger girls yawned and Mr Graham dozed off in his favourite chair. Mrs Graham's interest in the Beta was easier to understand. Were he to choose his spouse from among the Graham children, then the issue of the entailment would be rendered moot.

'I daresay Lady Bedelia is very agreeable,' said Mrs Graham, taking advantage of a rare moment of silence as Mr Franklyn sipped tentatively from his glass of port wine shortly after finishing the sermon on sobriety. 'Does she live near you?'

Mr Franklyn's eyes immediately brightened. 'The garden in which stands my humble abode is separated only by a lane from Fell Park, her ladyship's residence.'

'Only a lane? How fortunate for you,' commented Will blandly. He was rewarded with a kick from Alana and a gratified smile from Mr Franklyn.

'Indeed, my dear cousin, indeed.'

'And has she any family?' continued Mrs Graham, all agog.

'One son, Francis, the heir of Fell Park. He is,' confided Mr Franklyn in hushed tones, 'unfortunately of a sickly constitution, which has prevented him from being much in society.'

In great danger of disgracing himself by lapsing into snorts of laughter, Will took the awkward pause which followed this statement to excuse himself on the pretext of checking on the horses. There was no doubt that this was going to be a very long twelve days.

***

The next morning, Abigail pestered and pleaded to be allowed to walk into the village; and so Will was enlisted to accompany his youngest sister, along with Fredricka and the ubiquitous Mr Franklyn.

'Come with us, Alana, I beg you,' groaned Will, having hunted for her all over the house as the others waited in the hallway, finally finding her sitting reading in the quiet of her room. 'Do not condemn me to deal with this alone.'

His sister immediately put down her book and smiled. 'Lay on, Macduff.'

Ostensibly wishing to shop for new bonnets, as soon as they entered the high street Abigail and Fredricka spotted their true quarry: one of the Alpha officers, Mr Randall, who had dined frequently at the Grahams' in Will and Alana's absence. Waving frantically at him from across the street, they were reduced to fits of giggles as he waved in return and walked over in the company of a young man whom they had never seen before.

Will observed, curiosity piqued, as the stranger was introduced by Mr Randall as Mr Matthew Brown, who had lately accepted a commission in the corps. Dressed smartly, though not yet in the regimentals which Abigail and Fredricka found so becoming on Mr Randall, Mr Brown was unquestionably handsome. His russet greatcoat did nothing to disguise a svelte figure, and his black high crowned hat and silver-topped walking stick lent him a not unbecoming dandyish air. Short, wavy dark hair framed a pale face, and his eyes darted from person to person, settling finally on Will.

Instinctively, Will backed away a little. Even if he had not caught the man's unmistakable Alpha scent – a rather overpowering musk – he would have guessed Mr Brown's secondary gender from the predatory gleam in those hawk-like green eyes.

Yet in the next moment the newcomer blinked and the look was gone, replaced with mere friendly curiosity. Feeling that perhaps his imagination had been playing tricks on him, Will forced himself to relax and summon a friendly greeting for the village's newest addition.

But before Will could open his mouth to ask Mr Brown how he was finding the neighbourhood, the sound of horses drew his attention and his eyes widened at the sight of Hannibal and Miss Verger riding side-by-side down the street. Immediately, all thoughts of their new acquaintance flew out of his head and he was transported back to the humiliation of his final day at Muskrat Hall. Inevitably, Miss Verger caught sight of Alana, and equally inevitably she rode over to speak to her. As Hannibal also drew near, Will fought to no avail against the blush he could feel burning his cheeks, and was determining to look anywhere *but* at Hannibal when, too late, their eyes met. And held. Will's heart skipped at the unexpected softness in the rich amber of Hannibal's gaze, until the Alpha caught sight of Mr Brown and all traces of warmth were eradicated in an instant.

As Hannibal and Mr Brown faced one another, both changed colour: one looked white, the other red. Mr Brown touched his hat in greeting, a gesture which Hannibal barely deigned to reciprocate before turning his horse sharply and riding away. Miss Verger hastily took her leave and followed him, and the whole party continued talking together except for Will, who could only feign interest

in the topic of a dinner for the officers the following evening at his aunt's house. It was impossible to imagine what could be the meaning of Hannibal's slighting of Mr Brown, yet he longed to know.

**

Mrs Graham's sister, Mrs Prurnell, was always glad to see her nephew and nieces; and Will was never more happy to see his gregarious aunt than on this day, when he was able to accomplish two tasks at once. Firstly, ridding himself of Mr Franklyn's irksome attentions by encouraging him to explain to Mrs Prurnell – at length – the history of his acquaintanceship with Lady Bedelia. And secondly, extracting a promise from his aunt to make Mr Prurnell call on Mr Brown the following day, with an invitation to dine at their home.

Still troubled by what he had seen pass between Hannibal and the regiment's newest lieutenant, Will related the incident to Alana as they walked home, but neither could explain it. And so it was with a growing sense of anticipation that Will walked into his aunt's house the following evening. Mr Brown was already present, talking with Mr Randall, Mr Prurnell and a couple of the other officers. All eyes were on the newcomer, and when he detached himself from the group and made his way over to seat himself by Will, the latter felt the weight of their speculation on himself as well.

'I was pleased to make the acquaintance of Miss Verger yesterday,' said Mr Brown, after they had exchanged general pleasantries. 'I believe that she and her brother have leased Muskrat Hall. Do you know how long they intend to remain there?'

'I do not,' shrugged Will, 'although I have no idea of their intending to leave in the near future. Why do you ask?'

'I know something of the family,' said Mr Brown with somewhat studied casualness. 'They are a restless lot.' He hesitated. 'How long has Mr Lecter been staying with them?'

Pulse quickening, Will endeavoured to keep his flustered feelings hidden. 'About a month; he has an estate of his own in Derbyshire, I believe.'

'Yes,' said Mr Brown, mouth twisting into a peculiar smile, 'Ravenstag House. It clears at least ten thousand per annum.' Leaning towards Will, he added softly, 'I could tell you much of *that* family, and of Mr Lecter, for we have been connected since infancy.'

Will's astonishment must have shown in his face, for Mr Brown hummed. 'You may well be surprised, Mr Graham, after witnessing the cold manner of our greeting yesterday.' Another hesitation. 'Are you – much acquainted with Mr Lecter?'

For an instant, Will recalled a soft brush of fingers and a picture changing hands; listening, captivated, to a description of sunset over water in a faraway city, told in a voice deep and rich; eyes meeting in tentative rapport and shared humour.

But then...

Sympathy had been replaced by coldness, warmth by repudiation. Insults traded and walls erected. And a blossoming hope of *something* – a thing so intangible, it did not even have a name – had withered and crumbled to dust.

*Am I much acquainted with Hannibal Lecter?*

'As much as ever I wish to be,' he said gruffly, reignited anger provoking him to indiscretion. 'He is not at all liked here. Everybody is disgusted with his pride.'

'Indeed? I believe that does not happen often,' drawled Mr Brown. 'The world is usually blinded by his consequence, and sees him only as he chooses to be seen.'

'And how do *you* see him, Mr Brown?' There was undoubtedly more that the officer wanted to say, and certainly more that Will wished to hear. With the others occupied in either dancing or cards, he abandoned all pretence at discretion in favour of learning more of the infuriating man who continued to infiltrate his thoughts with tiresome persistence.

'It would pain me to say,' said Mr Brown, manner grave. 'His behaviour to myself has been scandalous, but worse than that was his breaking of the promise he made to his father on his deathbed.'

Will paled. 'But – that is shocking.'

'Indeed.' Mr Brown leaned closer. 'The late Mr Lecter was the best of men, Mr Graham. He was my godfather and excessively attached to me. In his will – knowing of my intention to make the church my profession – he bequeathed me the living on his estate once it fell vacant.' Shaking his head, Mr Brown continued, 'He meant to provide for me, but when the time came, the living was given to another.'

'Given to another? How could that be?' Will stared in ever-increasing consternation. 'If Mr Lecter had seen fit to give you the estate parish, I do not understand how his son *could* deny you that right – or why he would even choose to do so.'

Mr Brown pursed his lips. 'I believe that the younger Mr Lecter ever resented his father's attachment to me. And I have an unguarded temper – I may perhaps have spoken my opinions too freely in his presence. For whatever reason, he chose to disregard his father's last wishes as mere recommendation, for they were never set down on paper.'

*'I may perhaps have spoken my opinions too freely…'*

How many times, thought Will dazedly, had he himself spoken bluntly to Hannibal and been cut in consequence? With a sharp pang, he wondered whether Hannibal's brief overture of friendship had been merely a ploy to draw him out; to test and probe his character in a fit of whimsy. The bored Alpha aristocrat, entertained momentarily by a shiny Omega toy.

*Wind him up and watch him go.*

'I hardly know what to say,' he murmured, the dull ache in his heart increasing every moment. 'I had not thought Mr Lecter as bad as this. How can Miss Verger be on such friendly terms with him?'

'I have never met her.'

'She is perfectly amiable and sweet-tempered.' Will stared broodingly at the floor. 'She cannot know what he is.'

'Oh, he knows how to please where it suits him,' muttered Mr Brown. 'His sister worships him.'

At this, Will looked up. 'Miss Lecter? What is she like?'

'Too much like her brother – very, *very* proud,' came the clipped response.

'He deserves to be publicly disgraced.'

Though he tried to keep the bitterness from his voice, Will felt the curiosity in Mr Brown's gaze.

'If he is, it shall not be by me. I honour his father's memory too greatly.'

'Your forbearance does you credit, Mr Brown.'

As they shared a smile, Mr Franklyn, who was seated nearby playing whist, caused a minor fracas by accidentally jarring the table and upsetting the other players' hands. His exclamations of regret momentarily drew the attention of everyone in the room, and after the fuss had quieted down, Mr Brown enquired how long Will's cousin would be staying with them.

'Another nine days, thirteen hours and I should think about twenty-five minutes,' replied Will wearily, consulting the clock on the mantle.

Mr Brown grinned. 'I have heard him mention tonight with some regularity a certain Lady Bedelia du Maurier.'

'Ah yes.' Will sighed, relaxing a little and propping his elbows on the backrest of the sofa. 'He speaks of little else.'

'Hm. You know of course that Lady Bedelia is the younger sister of Simonetta, Mr Lecter's late mother.'

Surprise jolted through him. 'I did not.'

'Oh yes. Her son, Francis, will inherit a very large fortune, and it is widely believed that he and his cousin will unite the two estates.' Mr Brown's mouth twisted again into that odd smile which seemed reserved for mentions of the Lecter wealth.

'Really? Poor Mr Verger,' muttered Will sourly. His sense of discomfort was increasing rapidly, though he could not pinpoint the cause. But at the evening's end, after exchanging warm farewells with his new friend, he went away with his head full of Mr Brown and of what he had told him.

***

Will recounted to Alana the next day the main points of his conversation with Mr Brown. Irritatingly, rather than dreaming of short curls and charm-filled green eyes, he had been plagued all night by visions of a supercilious amber stare and stern, sculpted lips.

'Perhaps both labour under a misapprehension about the other,' suggested Alana, eyes shining with distress. 'I cannot bear to believe that Mr Lecter would have behaved so disgracefully – or that Miss Verger could be so deceived in her friend.'

'I am sorry, Alana, but I can more easily believe that Miss Verger has been imposed on than that Mr Brown should have invented such a history,' declared Will stubbornly as they walked together in the garden. 'If it is not true, then let Mr Lecter contradict it.'

'It is difficult indeed,' sighed Alana. 'One does not know what to think.'

'I beg your pardon,' scoffed Will, scuffing the gravel with vicious force. 'One knows *exactly* what to think.'

# Dancing

Chapter Notes

theseavoices has created a stunning illustration of the ball scene - you can find it within this chapter, as well as a beautiful close up at the end!

'Hannibal, will not you tell me what happened?'

Motionless, Hannibal continued to stare out of the window at the rain-soaked lawn. 'With regard to what?'

'With regard to you know perfectly well what,' replied Margot admonishingly. 'The man with whom you grew up, yet have refused even to *speak* of for the last year.'

'There is nothing to tell.'

'You mean there is nothing you *wish* to tell.'

Soft footsteps behind him signalled Margot's approach, and the next moment a gentle hand was laid on his shoulder. 'I would like to be of help if I can. I remember when first we met, you spoke quite fondly of Mr Brown.'

'Of the boy I had known,' corrected Hannibal. 'Not the man he had become. Why do you think you and he never met?'

'Did not he start at Oxford as you and Mason finished?'

'Even so.' Hannibal laughed shortly. 'Had *I* not been opposed, *he* was far too busy gallivanting in London to pay Ravenstag any heed, until –'

'Until? Hannibal?'

Fists clenched tightly behind his back, Hannibal bit out, 'I do not wish to discuss this further, Margot.'

Margot drew back her hand with a sigh and came to stand beside him. 'You stare out of this window every day. What is it that you see? Or is it what you do *not* see?' She turned earnest green eyes on him. 'What are you looking for, Hannibal?'

*What am I looking for?*

Certainly not a cavorting, recalcitrant, maddening boy with messy dark curls and mocking blue eyes. Not the boy he had sworn to forget, alarmed by feelings which had seemed only to grow stronger with each exasperating encounter; sticking grimly to his purpose on that final day despite the tightness in his chest when in the garden he had turned Will away - *'If you have no objection, I would like very much to hear more of your travels in Italy'* - and later, as he had pretended to read and had felt Will's accusing stare burning through to the back of his skull. Not the boy whose departure he had watched from an upper window, standing there long after the carriage had passed out of sight. And most assuredly not the boy whom he had chanced upon in the village making eyes at the one person – *the one person* – whom Hannibal loathed in all the world, who had stood beside Will with a look of triumph on his sneering face. Designing. Covetous. The sight so nauseating, Hannibal had felt himself pale from it; had retreated rather than follow his first instinct - a primal urge to jump from his horse and beat Matthew Brown until the pavement was stained red.

'I also miss them,' said Margot softly.

'Miss whom?' he enquired tightly, for such indulgence was not to be borne.

'But we shall see them at the ball in only a few days,' continued Margot, as if Hannibal had not spoken.

Poised to turn on his heel and leave Margot to her pointless fantasising, Hannibal hesitated as an unpleasant thought occurred.

'May I ask if you issued a general invitation to the officers of the regiment?'

'We did,' replied Margot calmly. 'It is the accepted practice, Hannibal. But you need not fear. Mr Brown has declined to attend; we received his note this morning.'

That, at least, was something. He would not have put it past Matthew Brown to have had the temerity to show his face, and Hannibal felt a little of the strain of the past few days dissipate. Still, Margot's marked partiality for Miss Graham was an ever-increasing concern; and as it seemed that Hannibal's own conflicted feelings were becoming obvious to his friends, he was now convinced that quitting Muskrat Hall would be the best solution all round. At any other time, that might have proven difficult to accomplish; but Mischa's letters had of late taken on a melancholic tone, and she had hinted more than once that she would be glad of company with Christmas almost upon them. This, Hannibal thought, might just be enough to prise Margot from the clutch of this damnable neighbourhood – and himself from the grip of his relentless preoccupation with Will Graham.

***

After a further three days of unrelenting rain, the morning of the ball dawned bright and cold. Restless and in need of diversion, Hannibal ate a sparing breakfast before venturing into the grounds with Ripper. In no mood to deal either with Mason's taunts or Margot's questions, he walked until the sun was high, enjoying what would in all likelihood be one of the last fine days before winter set in.

A flurry of preparations were underway by his return mid-afternoon, and Hannibal retreated to his chamber, issuing a stern order that he was not to be disturbed until absolutely necessary. Though he fully intended to use the time to catch up on his correspondence, in the event he accomplished very little, preoccupied by thoughts of Will and the prospect of their meeting again that evening. This continued inability to suppress his feelings was both frustrating and bewildering, and he was almost relieved when evening came and with it, the distraction of employment.

He had decided upon a black double-breasted coat and breeches for the ball, opting for a starched white waistcoat and simply-tied neck cloth beneath. Such excess of finery as Mason had chosen to peacock in, daring a coat of dark red with gold buckles on his shoes, was not at all to Hannibal's taste for an evening such as this. As it was, the local gentry would be vying for the attentions of their rich new Alpha neighbours; no need to give them cause for encouragement. Margot, he allowed, suited well her gown of orange silk. But he would have been more content were not her eyes sparkling with anticipation, the cause of which was plain enough to all.

Once dressed and at liberty to roam, he left Mason and Margot to the tedious task of greeting the steady stream of guests, and sought an upper room from which he was granted an excellent view of the drive. The Grahams were among the last to arrive, and the first to alight from their carriage was Will.

For long moments all Hannibal could do was stare, for never before had he seen the boy so coiffed and smartly-dressed, even at the Red Dragon assembly. An attempt had been made to tame that wild hair, though it was clear even from a distance that the artful arrangement of curls into a high

quiff was doomed to disarrangement as soon as any vigorous activity was undertaken. Atop beige breeches sat snug a high-waisted velvet coat of blue-grey, neatly-tied neck cloth and white waistcoat peeking out at top and bottom. Evidently much care had been taken to present Will at his most becoming, and as his siblings alighted it became clear that this was true of them all. Cotton and muslin has been replaced by satin and lace; hair piled high was ornamented by ribbons and beads; and while Hannibal acknowledged that Miss Graham in particular looked most pleasing in a long gown of cream satin, hair upswept with short curls framing her face, his overriding impression of the Graham children and their parents as they walked up the torch-lit driveway was that of a pair of traders intent on exhibiting their goods.

'To market, to market,' he muttered darkly, and swung away from the window with a grim shake of his head.

***

Until Will entered the drawing room at Muskrat Hall and looked in vain for Mr Brown among the cluster of red coats there assembled, a doubt of his being present had never occurred.

'There is Randall,' cried Abigail eagerly. 'He will know where Mr Brown is to be found.' And she crossed the crowded room with bullish Alpha determination to solicit the officer.

Will followed at a slower pace and was just in time to hear the vexing news.

'Sadly, our dear Brown was obliged to go to town yesterday on business, and he is not yet returned,' said Mr Randall, adding with a significant smile, 'I must say, however, that I do not imagine his business would have called him away at this particular time had he not wished to avoid a certain *gentleman*.'

'You mean Mr Lecter,' said Will in disgust.

Mr Randall shrugged, but his expression said all, and not for the first time Will wondered with frustration how it was possible that *all* Hannibal Lecter's friends could have been so wilfully deceived in him. Bitten by sharp displeasure, he was set to question Mr Randall further when he was addressed from behind by an irritatingly familiar voice.

'Cousin Will?'

*What now?*

'Yes, Mr Franklyn?' As he turned reluctantly.

With one eye out for Beverly, Will failed at first to realise the significance of his cousin's materialisation, until the hand extended to him provided an unwelcome reminder of how, the previous evening, he had been pressed to accept Mr Franklyn's solicitation of the first two dances.

*The first two. A full hour spent dancing with this buffoon!*

What mortification then followed, as Mr Franklyn tripped and giggled and missed countless cues. Will grew more and more discomfited with every step, and at the end of the second dance he could feel only gratitude that social convention prevented his cousin from asking him for a *third*.

Mercifully released, and finally spotting Beverly across the room, Will hurried to her side to acquaint her with the news of Mr Brown's absence and the reason for it.

'Is Mr Brown really the sort to be frightened away by someone of a higher social rank?' asked Beverly sceptically. 'If indeed he has been wronged by Mr Lecter, why not confront him and have done with it?'

'Because of his respect for the *late* Mr Lecter,' returned Will crossly. 'Really, Beverly, you might be more sympathetic.'

'Well, he certainly seems to have won *your* sympathy.' Beverly narrowed her eyes, and Will shifted uncomfortably under her scrutiny. 'Or is this about *more* than just sympathy for poor Mr Brown?'

'Certainly not!' snapped Will, groaning as he spied Mr Franklyn moving in their direction. 'Oh, will this interminable evening never end?'

About to launch into a tirade about the appalling awkwardness of his cousin, the words died in Will’s throat as he scented a familiar rich, warm earthiness that set his heart thudding erratically.

'Good evening, Mr Graham.'

Tension stiffened his spine, and he turned slowly to face Hannibal, mouth drying at the impact of the Alpha's stark, severe beauty. Blonde and amber against a canvas of black and white. Mesmerising. Damned infuriatingly so.

'Good evening, Mr Lecter,' he replied icily.

The disdainful gaze of the unquestionably beautiful boy whose chin was tilted at him so haughtily caused Hannibal to suppress a smile. Will was such a fierce bundle of Omega defensiveness, ever ready to fight for what he believed to be right, and completely uncaring of rank. Very few people of Hannibal's acquaintance had ever shown even an ounce of such passion about anything. Was it any wonder, then, that Will enthralled him so? Of course, there could be no future in it; and doubtless, once removed from the boy's intoxicating presence, Hannibal would soon be freed from all thoughts of him. Still, in the meantime...

'Would you do me the honour of dancing the next with me?'

A flare of surprise widened those blue eyes, and Hannibal was anticipating a swift refusal when instead Will said simply, 'Yes.'

Feeling slightly wrong-footed, and already regretting his impulsive offer, Hannibal bowed and walked away. There was just time for a fortifying glass of Madeira, and at that precise moment he felt in great need of one.

'Was I sleepwalking just now, Beverly? Why did not I refuse him?' Will turned frustrated eyes on his amused friend.

'Perhaps you did not wish to.'

'Of course I did. I swore I would *never* dance with him,' he muttered, scuffing the floor with the toe of his shoe.

Beverly patted his arm and grinned. 'I daresay you will find him very agreeable.'

'Heaven forbid!' scowled Will. 'To find a man agreeable whom one is determined to hate? Do not wish on me such evil!'

'Hush, here he comes,' cautioned Beverly. And, as Will pulled a sour face, 'Will! For heaven's sake, think of what you are doing. You should not allow your fancy for Mr Brown to make you appear unpleasant to a man of ten times his consequence!'

But Will was too busy attempting to calm his racing heart to pay Beverly much heed. There was something decidedly unnerving about Hannibal's unsmiling approach as he came forward to claim his dance.

Gesturing for Will to precede him onto the floor, Hannibal was acutely aware that all eyes were on them as they took their places at the top of the set. He was unsure at first whether the surreptitious looks they were receiving from left and right constituted amazement at the honour which Hannibal was bestowing on the partner of his choice. But he sensed quickly that most were regarding Will with covetousness and himself with envy. The knowledge did not surprise him – Will was, after all, the only Omega in the room, and a beauty at that. What did surprise him, greatly, was the surge of protectiveness which he felt towards the dark-haired boy standing opposite, cheeks aflame beneath so much scrutiny.

As the musicians struck up, filling the room with gentle strains coaxed into existence by strings and wind, Hannibal felt his blood thrumming with anticipation. Counting the beats of the first measure, he kept his eyes fastened on Will. The boy's head was downcast in a show of demureness. Yet in a moment, Hannibal would move in to claim his hand, and he wanted to see the expression in Will's eyes when he did.

*Look at me,* he commanded silently.

And in the heartbeat's pause which signalled the start of the dance, Will looked up.

Hannibal's gaze was intent as he stepped towards him, hand outstretched, and Will endeavoured to conceal the trembling which had seized him from the moment he had realised which dance they were required to perform. Unlike the lively Shrewsbury Lasses and Barley Mow, through which he had been forced to suffer the ridiculous prancing of Mr Franklyn, the English country dance required perfect sympathy and accord between partners. It was, in a word... intimate.

Perhaps Hannibal had not realised the order of the dances when he had made the request. Or perhaps this was yet another example of his mind games.

*Of course it is. When last you met, he would not even acknowledge your existence. Remember?*

Eyes narrowing, Will resolved in that moment to be the cause of much regret to the Alpha for requesting his company, in retribution for these seemingly never-ending manipulations.

*If you wish to play, Hannibal, then you must be prepared to pay.*

He smiled his sweetest smile and stretched out his hand to Hannibal, noting with glee the Alpha's slight misstep at his abrupt volte-face. But when finally their fingertips brushed, it was Will's turn to falter. Hannibal's palm slid warm and dry against his own, the slight calluses indicative of a seasoned equestrian pleasurably abrasive. But he kept his countenance; and as they turned first one way and then the other, Will held Hannibal's gaze, restraining with difficulty a satisfied smirk at the faint stain of red on those high cheekbones.

Parting only to meet and part again, they moved through the second measure without speaking. But as they clasped hands to begin the third, Will decided that the greater punishment would be to force Hannibal *into* conversation.

'My aunt taught me the steps to this dance the year I turned fifteen.' With subtle emphasis, he added, 'It was just after they had moved to Cheapside to be closer to my Uncle Crawford's law firm.'

He watched Hannibal closely but the Alpha failed, beyond the infinitesimal lift of a brow, to react to the reference to an address which most would consider decidedly unfashionable.

'I am to join him next year.'

This did at last elicit a response. 'You wish to practice the law?'

'It is a respectable profession for a gentleman's son, is not it?'

'Most assuredly.'

Separated briefly by the demands of the dance, when next they came together Will commented gravely, 'It is your turn to say something now, Mr Lecter.'

'You talk by rule when you are dancing?'

Lifting limpid eyes, Will replied softly, 'Only if the conversation is agreeable to both parties, sir. To be entirely silent for half an hour together would seem odd, do not you think? Yet,' he added with a plaintive sigh, without giving Hannibal a chance to respond, 'it still remains that sometimes one partner is left quite alone to talk to the air.'

Hannibal's expression darkened, and Will knew that he had succeeded in reminding the Alpha of his recent, less than courteous behaviour. Again they parted; and upon reclaiming Will's hand, Hannibal grasped it more tightly than before.

'It was not my intention to cause you grief.'

'Oh, please, do not trouble yourself to apologise.'

Will's gracious smile was as artificial as his saccharine tone, and he tugged his hand away as once again they moved apart.

'I was not apologising. I was stating a fact,' said Hannibal coolly, upon their next turn together.

'I do not doubt it,' replied Will archly. 'I was merely being polite, Mr Lecter. The truth is, I believe that in some ways you and I are just alike. We are each naturally reserved and taciturn, unwilling to speak unless it is to say something that will amaze the whole room.'

'I would think this is no very striking resemblance of your own character,' said Hannibal in clipped tones. 'Clearly, however, you think it a faithful portrait of mine.'

'As a matter of fact I –'

But before Will could confess that he was, for once, being sincere – if a little facetious – in his observations, they were again parted.

Silence fell between them, until after another half measure Hannibal enquired rather stiffly, 'Do you and your sisters often walk into the village?'

'Yes,' said Will shortly, and would have contented himself with that reply had not a demon of mischief prompted him to add, 'When you saw us there the other day, we had just been making a new acquaintance.'

The effect was immediate. Hannibal tensed, eyes filling with contempt, and it was some moments before he again spoke.

'Mr Brown is blessed with happy manners that enable him to *make friends easily enough – whether he is equally capable of retaining them is less certain.'*

Stung, Will retorted more unguardedly than he had intended. 'From what I have been given to understand, Mr Brown has been unlucky enough to lose *your* friendship in a way he is likely to suffer from all his life.'

In that moment, Hannibal felt a throb of anger so intense, it was all he could do to keep his countenance. The thought of Matthew Brown whispering poison in Will's ear with impunity was unconscionable, yet there was nothing to be done. He would not break the vow he had made. No matter how much he might wish to...

Fortunately, the end of another measure provided an opportunity for respite and a chance to rein in his feelings as he once more stood apart from the vexatious Omega, who could now only glower at him from the set opposite. *Un*fortunately, Sir James Price chose that precise moment to pass by, and stopped upon spying Hannibal.

'Ah, sir, what a pleasure it is to see such a fine example of modern dancing. And my dear Will!' Beaming at him across the set. 'I hope that this shall be the first of many occasions when I shall have the pleasure of seeing you dance together.'

The smile that Will conjured for Sir James was so pained, Hannibal almost laughed aloud, despite the ire which lingered still. Yet a moment later, all traces of humour evaporated as Sir James glanced knowingly at Margot and Miss Graham, partnered a little further down the set, and then winked at Will.

'Perhaps the next shall be a *wedding* dance, eh?'

For Margot to be the subject of local gossip was not to be borne; and as Sir James moved on, Hannibal turned to Will with censure at the ready. Yet far from appearing triumphant, Will radiated only deep embarrassment. Worry clouded his eyes, teeth sucking in his lower lip in a manner which Hannibal found most distracting. And suddenly, his overriding instinct was to comfort the distressed Omega. As they resumed the dance, he found himself searching for a topic which would relieve the feelings of both.

'During your stay here, you spent much of your time reading. Was there a volume in particular that you enjoyed?'

Will levelled at him a flat look as he stepped nimbly past. 'You wish now to talk of books, Mr Lecter? Dear me. We really do have very little to say to one another.'

Hannibal smiled, too caught up in admiring the boy's graceful movements to be offended. 'But surely, Mr Graham, you would relish the opportunity to eviscerate my literary tastes?'

Will merely arched a brow, and Hannibal felt immediately the need to shake that dismissive hauteur. When next they clasped hands, upon again parting he trailed his fingertips down Will's palm, lingering until, to his satisfaction, a very becoming tinge of red spread across Will's cheeks.

'Come,' he prompted, complacency sweeping away the last traces of annoyance. 'Indulge me. It will, if nothing else, occupy us through the final measure. I recall seeing The Compleat Angler in your hands more than once. Do not you care for novels?'

'I care for interesting reading,' came the swift rejoinder. 'Genre is of little consequence.'

Before Hannibal could respond, the dance ended, and with a curt nod Will walked from the floor. Such rudeness would generally result in no small amount of anger being directed towards its instigator. In this case, however, he could summon only frustration as he watched the boy stalk across the room.

*Matthew Brown, this is your doing. And one day, I swear, there will be a reckoning.*

The smell of beeswax was heavy in the air, mixing with the sweet aroma of hot port wine, lemon and nutmeg as guests strolled about, sipping Negus from generous goblets. Feeling the need to escape and perhaps take the air for a few minutes, Will was disconcerted to find his path blocked unexpectedly by a ruddy-faced Mr Verger.

'Ah, Mr Graham. A little piggy tells me that you recently made the acquaintance of Matthew Brown – and that by all accounts you find him delightful company!'

'What of it?' Will bristled at the idea that he was the subject of idle gossip. 'Mr Brown is but newly arrived in the neighbourhood and is, as far as I know, well-liked by all who have met him here.'

'Then you know very little,' sneered Mr Verger. 'Matthew Brown is a prancing fool who masquerades as a gentleman when he is, in fact, merely the son of the late Mr Lecter's steward.' Sloshing his drink as he gesticulated, he exclaimed, 'And his coming into the neighbourhood at all is an outrageous impertinence after the infamous way in which he has behaved towards Mr Lecter.'

'You call Mr *Brown's* behaviour infamous?' Will could scarcely believe the hypocrisy of the charge. 'In what way, pray?'

Mr Verger's brow wrinkled almost comically as he appeared to fight for coherence in his wine-soaked haze. 'I – do not recall the exact details, but I *can* tell you that Mr Lecter is entirely blameless.' Leaning in, he prodded Will's chest and grinned, showing purple-stained teeth. 'I pity you for the discovery of your favourite's guilt, Mr Graham. But really, considering his origins, one could expect no better.'

A heavy, bitter scent rose in unpleasant waves from the slurring Alpha, and Will stepped back. Nevertheless, he felt compelled to defend the man whose very name seemed abhorrent to the Muskrat company, yet whose absence made it impossible for him to defend himself.

'Considering his *origins*?'

Thinking of all the times he had been confronted with such prejudice against himself, Will felt in that moment a strong urge to knock the glass from his host's hand.

'His guilt and his *origins* appear to you to be one and the same,' he scorned. 'I have heard you accuse him of nothing worse than being the son of a steward.'

Glancing over Will's shoulder, Mr Verger's eyes widened and he laughed uneasily. 'I beg your pardon. Please excuse my interference, Mr Graham. It was – kindly meant.'

As Mr Verger weaved unsteadily away, Will turned to see what had caused him finally to retreat, and scowled ferociously as his eyes connected with Hannibal's. Standing a few yards away with a goblet clenched in his fist, the Alpha looked as grim as Will had ever seen him, and Will wondered how much of the conversation he had overheard. Or perhaps, he thought despairingly, it was the excessively shrill giggling of Abigail and Fredricka – who stood nearby fluttering their lashes at a group of young officers – that had roused Hannibal's ire. Or the ear-piercingly off-key singing of Molly in the outer hall, whom even at that moment was being coaxed loudly from the pianoforte by their father, that the musicians might be allowed to strike up for another dance.

Unable to bear the weight of Hannibal's censorious gaze a moment longer, Will spun away and headed in the direction of a rear exit. But he was stopped in his tracks by Mr Franklyn and, surprisingly, Beverly.

'Will, I must say you danced divinely just now,' smiled the latter with a wink. 'I wonder what – or who – has inspired such lightness of foot.'

'Ah yes, fair cousin,' beamed Mr Franklyn, mopping beads of sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief. 'Miss Price and I have been watching with enchantment. And I have discovered to my astonishment that your dancing partner is none other than the nephew of my gracious patroness, Lady Bedelia!'

'Why, yes –'

But before Will could continue, Mr Franklyn bowed to them both and continued with haste towards Hannibal, whose brows rose at the sight of the slightly dishevelled, perspiring man who lumbered towards him.

'Mr Franklyn, you have not yet been introduced,' hissed Will, to no avail as his cousin practically prostrated himself at Hannibal's feet.

'I cannot watch,' he groaned, tugging on Beverly's arm. 'Come, perhaps there is a cellar in which I can hide for the remainder of the evening.'

'It is not as bad as all that,' laughed Beverly. 'To be sure, your cousin lacks certain social graces. But he seems at heart a good person. He speaks most highly of your father. And,' she added slyly, 'of you.'

Grimacing, Will pulled his friend from the room and made a hasty retreat through the outer hall. Mrs Graham stood by the main staircase, surrounded by a gaggle of rapt ladies, and Will understood why when he heard his mother exclaim excitedly, 'And of course, Alana's marriage to Miss Verger will surely throw my younger children into the paths of *other* rich Alphas!'

'Do something,' pleaded Will, turning agonised eyes on Beverly, 'before I evaporate in a puddle of mortification!'

'My poor Will.' Beverly chuckled. 'No power on this earth would, I fear, be enough to stop your mother. But one thing I can do for you, and that most gladly.'

'What would that be?' sighed Will, passing a hand across his face, and wishing only for the evening to end.

'Well, do not look now, but Mr Franklyn is on his way back, and he seems intent on claiming your attention. If you hurry, you might escape.' And giving him a shove, she added, 'I shall keep him occupied, I promise.'

It was with huge relief that Will stepped out into the blessed quiet of the garden. Although immediately bitten by the chill, he walked on until enveloped by the first line of trees.

Thinking himself safe, he loosened his neck cloth and rested his forehead against the broad trunk of an oak, exhaling a long sigh of frustration.

'Your cousin is, I warrant, an unusual specimen. But there really was no need for you to flee for the trees, Mr Graham.'

With weary resignation, Will turned around to face the Alpha who stood only a few feet away. In the darkness, Hannibal's eyes appeared to glitter with strange intensity, and Will had suddenly to concentrate on breathing.

'I was not fleeing,' he replied smartly. 'I was taking the air.'

Hannibal advanced a few steps, and Will realised his predicament as the tree at his back prevented his moving any further away.

'You were escaping. Admit it,' challenged Hannibal softly, gaze lingering on Will's throat. 'And apparently once again shedding your clothes at the first opportunity.'

There was a hunger in that gaze – banked yet unmistakable – which Will shivered to acknowledge. It astonished him, and he wondered briefly whether Hannibal could be in rut. But no – an Alpha's rut could be brought on only by the presence of an unbonded Omega in heat. And Will's next heat was not due for many months. Was there, he hazarded, another Omega in the neighbourhood of whom he was unaware? The idea was strangely unpalatable.

'Did you follow me just now?'

'Yes.'

The blunt reply set Will's heart thudding again.

'Why? When I wanted to be your friend, you made it very plain that you wished me far away. What has changed?'

'Absolutely nothing,' breathed Hannibal, closing in until they were a mere whisper apart. He planted his hands on either side of the trunk, eyes suddenly earnest on Will's face. 'Do not ask me to explain it. I cannot. But you *draw* me, Will Graham, as no other ever has.'

Desire coiled sweet and hot at this admission, and Will fought the urge to arch his bared throat and tug the Alpha to him, inviting him to scent and lick. Just the thought of it aroused him in a way he found at once thrilling and frightening. And illuminating.

*How long have I wanted him?*

It would take so little – their bodies already almost brushing, Hannibal's earthy scent intoxicating Will as no amount of wine could – but so much stood between them; and uppermost on Will's mind was the troubling charge which Mr Brown had made.

'You told me once that your resentment, once created, was implacable.' Grave blue eyes searched serious amber. 'You are very careful, I hope, in *allowing* it to be created.'

'I am.'

Hannibal's reply, firm and unhesitating, increased Will's confusion.

'And never allow yourself to be blinded by prejudice?'

'I hope not.'

Will dug his fingers into the bark's scar-like fissures, staring rapt at lips quirked now in bemusement.

*How would they feel pressed to mine?*

'What is it that you are asking me, Mr Graham?'

'I am trying to understand you,' he murmured, freezing as Hannibal's eyes fixed on Will's own lips.

'And what is your success?'

Will breathed a ragged sigh. 'I do not get on at all. You puzzle me exceedingly, and to tell the truth I – am at a loss.'

The barest movement from either and their lips would connect. Sharing breath, sharing warmth. It seemed to Will in that moment that they were suspended in time, and the strange ache within him increased with every beat of his heart.

*Please, just kiss me. Please. I do not want to think any more.*

Perhaps his expression betrayed him; for in the next instant, Hannibal's eyes darkened and he lifted a hand to brush the backs of his fingers across Will's cheek, before stroking the curls from his forehead with peculiar tenderness.

'I knew that ridiculous quiff would drop,' he smiled.

And, oh, in that instant Will forgot about Matthew Brown and Mason Verger, about differences in birth and fortune, about injured pride and petty bickering. There was only the spongy moss beneath his boots, the rough bark at his back, the cold snap of a clear November night. And Hannibal. Mouth curved softly upwards and body radiating warmth and eyes gentle on Will's face.

Slowly, Will's eyes drifted closed, and he tilted his chin in invitation.

'Hannibal? Devil take you, where have you got to? *Hannibal,* I say!'

Will's eyes flew open again as Hannibal, cursing, jerked upright. Mr Verger's agitated voice sounded alarmingly close, and it seemed that at any moment he would stumble upon them.

'I should go.'

Desperately embarrassed, Will looked frantically about for the surest escape route. But a hand on his arm stayed him.

'No, wait here,' instructed Hannibal tersely. 'I shall deal with this.'

Yet despite the disrupted mood, he imparted a final lingering glance which Will felt down to his toes, before turning away and striding back out onto the moon-washed lawn.

# Parting

Will waited. He waited until he was shivering with cold, fingers almost numb. He waited until the sounds of laughter and carousing grew muted, a sure sign that the guests were beginning to succumb to the rigours of the evening. But Hannibal did not return. Perhaps, Will thought forlornly as he blew on his hands, he had been somehow prevented.

*Or perhaps he has remembered that you are the illegitimate offspring of a mere country squire.*

Old familiar sick feelings of rejection and self-doubt gripped him, churning his insides; and for one wild moment, Will considered abandoning caution and attempting the three mile walk home in the dark, risks of breaking a limb or being attacked by highwaymen be damned. But he knew his family would be frantic if he disappeared. And Will Graham did not run from anything.

Still, it was difficult not to allow regret the upper hand. Hannibal's scent lingered still, the moments they had shared fresh in Will's mind.

*'...you draw me, Will Graham, as no other ever has.'*

*Please, just kiss me. Please.*

Cheeks grown hot with humiliation, Will slumped back against the tree, scrubbing his fingers through his hair.

*This is the man who brought ruin to Matthew Brown. He despises your family. He has scorned you countless times. And yet you allowed him to touch you and* begged *him to kiss you.*

Had their physical proximity during the dance triggered his latent Omegan instincts? This was, after all, the first time he had danced with an Alpha with whom he had not been long acquainted. Lost in a maelstrom of confusion, Will clung to this comforting thought, brushing aside the traitorous voice which whispered of countless other times his heart had thundered in Hannibal's presence, regardless of their physical proximity.

It was now uncomfortably cold. Cursing his own stupidity, Will pushed away from the trunk and trudged back across the frost-tinged lawn, now limned silver in the moonlight.

Against the silhouetted darkness of the house, points of candlelight danced and flickered like fireflies in every window. The door by which Will had made his escape stood open, the shadow of a figure in the doorway bringing him to an abrupt standstill, until the person stepped forward and Will realised that it was Alana. Cheeks tinged with pink, eyes anxiously searching the grounds, she gave a brief exclamation of relief as she saw him.

Will hastened to her, grasping her outstretched hands as he reached the threshold.

'What is the matter?'

'Oh, Will! I am so glad you are returned. Mother is being rather more verbose than usual.'

'More than usual?' Will stared at his sister in horror. 'Dear gods, what is she saying?'

Alana sighed. 'Many, many things. The latest of which is that she plans to oversee redecoration of the Verger’s drawing room immediately after the wedding.'

'Please tell me the Vergers did not overhear *that*.'

'If only wishing made it so.' Alana sighed.

Aghast, Will followed his sister back into the house and through to the dining parlour, where the guests were now seated around numerous small tables, feasting on a variety of cold cuts and sweets. Unfortunately, as a consequence of the lull in conversation, the shrill - and rather slurred - tones of Mrs Graham were clearly distinguishable. From her prime position in the centre of the room, she held court amongst a gaggle of eager listeners.

'And I told my sister – I said to Mrs Prurnell – I know of the perfect Beta surrogate once my dear Alana is married and settled. The Fosters have twice employed him, and a fine pair of boys they have now!'

Mr Graham, sandwiched between his three youngest children, met Will's eyes with an expression of weary resignation.

'I am so sorry.' Will drew Alana aside as their mother was defeated at last into silence by an enormous piece of cake. 'For abandoning you all in that way, I mean.'

'*You* are hardly to blame,' said Alana with a rueful smile. 'The punch, perhaps, but most assuredly not you, dear Will. Besides, I understand fully your need to escape.'

At the furthest end of the room sat Miss Verger at a table with her sister and Mr Cordell. Head bowed, she appeared to be enduring something of a lecture, and Will frowned as he imagined the likely subject of their discourse.

'No.' He shook his head. 'It was thoughtless and self-indulgent.' As he considered just *how* indulgent, he blushed with shame.

Hannibal and Mr Verger were noticeable by their absence, and Will both feared and longed for the return of *one*, while caring not a jot about the *other*. He suspected that Hannibal had quit the general company in disgust – either regretful of his actions in the garden or contemptuous of Mrs Graham's indiscreet prattle – or both. Eyes trained on the doorway, he paid scant attention to Alana's next words, until he realised that the name of Matthew Brown had passed her lips.

'I beg your pardon. My mind was elsewhere just now. What did you say of Mr Brown?'

'That although Miss Verger does not know the whole of the history,' repeated Alana patiently, 'she is convinced that Mr Brown is by no means a respectable young man.' Touching Will's forearm, she added earnestly, 'I am sorry to say it, Will, but I fear we may have been deceived there.'

Will had hardly time enough to digest this unsettling idea before he was thrown into further confusion by the sudden reappearance of the two Alphas. Hannibal’s countenance was sternly forbidding; Mr Verger appeared a great deal vexed. They passed the alcove within which Will and Alana stood partially screened by the open door, and Will felt a curious fluttering in his stomach as he caught Hannibal's scent. It floated above all others, strangely grounding despite the antipathy which he once again felt towards the aristocratic Alpha. Still, the very last thing he wished for now was a face to face encounter with Hannibal so soon after having endured yet another humiliation at his hands.

'Come,' he whispered, taking his bemused sister by the hand and whisking her from the room. In the vestibule, he released her and sighed his relief. 'Now we may talk without interruption. I did not know that Miss Verger was acquainted with Mr Brown. Indeed, he indicated quite the reverse.'

'You are correct. She does not know him at all, but that is –'

'Then her account has been fed to her by Mr Lecter!' Will shook his head in frustration. *More lies.* 'I am sorry, Alana. I have no doubt of Miss Verger's sincerity, but she cannot equably judge a situation in which her only informant is so very partial! No, my opinion of both gentlemen shall remain unchanged.'

Hannibal watched Will's hasty departure with deep regret. The sweetness of the Omega's scent had announced itself like a siren's call, yet Hannibal had forced himself to stay with Mason when his greatest wish had been to turn back, grab Will and take him somewhere wholly devoid of miscreant friends and mothers, that he might attempt to explain his actions. The idea that Will might believe himself to have been abandoned to no purpose was unconscionable. But Mason could not be allowed the liberty to roam, and that was that.

'Whatever has happened?' asked Margot, looking from one to the other in concern.

'Well might you ask,' replied Hannibal grimly. 'Would you care to enlighten your family, Mason?'

'To what end?' came the sulky response. 'You have decided to take a *servant's* side, therefore you must tell it as you wish.'

Ignoring Mason, Hannibal addressed Margot and Mrs Cordell. 'A short while ago, your brother called for my assistance to deal with one of the housemaids, who had, by *his* account, set upon him in a fit of apoplexy and was in dire need of calming.'

'With a house full of guests, what other option did I have?' muttered Mason.

'Yet it seems that the reason for the maid's distress was Mason himself.' Hannibal directed a quelling glare at him before turning back to Margot and the Cordells. 'He had apparently been courting the girl on the promise of an engagement which, of course, was never forthcoming. And Mason chose this evening to break the unhappy news to her.'

'Mason, really!' tutted Cordell as Mason's sisters stared at him, one with incredulity, the other in horror. 'A little discretion, man.'

'She would not desist from pestering me,' whined Mason, 'and I care not what she says. I never promised *marriage*. Am I to be blamed for the fanciful assumptions of a servant?'

'What *did* you promise?' Margot's eyes were full of censure.

Her brother tossed his head. 'One says what one says in certain… situations. Wine and moonlight have been known to render even the best of us unwise at times. The girl should have had more sense than to pay my words any heed.'

When, earlier, Hannibal had witnessed Mason touching Will, he had been possessed of a strong urge to take hold of the Alpha's prodding finger and rip off the offending digit. Half-fearing that he might yet give in to the temptation of doing bodily harm to the man whose company was proving increasingly unpalatable, he said stiffly, 'My advice would be to leave for London as soon as possible. Stay a while in town and allow the girl to recover her dignity.'

'You have not dismissed her?' Mason's voice rose in outrage. 'Then I shall!'

'You shall do no such thing.' Standing over Mason, Hannibal lowered his own voice to a menacing hiss. 'She has been imposed on enough. And if you will not consider the girl, then consider how it would look were she to go about telling all and sundry about the Vergers and their broken promises. No, you will let her be. She values her job here, and all will be well if you are absent for a time.'

'I suppose that means we must all go,' sighed Margot. 'But not for too long, surely?'

Avoiding Margot's anxious gaze, Hannibal merely nodded. In truth, although the circumstances were regrettable, he could not help but see this as an opportunity. A valid reason at last to remove Margot from the sphere of the lovely yet wholly unsuitable Miss Graham. Her beauty notwithstanding, the Beta was too much of a mystery to risk Margot's unhappiness. And if she was possessed of even a fraction of her mother's avarice…

Besides, there were other, even more pressing considerations. Within the space of half an evening, he had forgotten his promise - his resolve to protect his sister, come what may, from the spiteful glare of society - because he had lost his head over a wild-haired, fiercely opinionated Omega. Yet surely, with distance and the relentless gaiety of the London Season, the boy's allure would fade. Recitals by the purest tenors would silence the soft voice that had begun to filter into Hannibal's dreams. Parlours filled with the exotic sweetness of orchids and roses would stifle the fresh vivacity of Will's scent. And somewhere - *somewhere* - there had to exist a person with eyes more beautiful than the bright blue which pierced Hannibal's soul each time he looked into them, and with hair more lustrous than the curls which had felt like coiled silk against his fingers...

Heartbeat quickening traitorously, Hannibal came to a swift decision. No explanations or apologies could be forthcoming. No matter how much it pained him, he could not again allow himself to be alone with Will. To do so would mean risking Mischa's reputation – for risk it would be, by association – and that, after all she had suffered already, he would not do. And if his heart lay like lead in his chest at the thought of parting on such terms, well, it was a self-indulgence he could ill afford.

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Fearing confrontation with Hannibal, Will insisted on lingering in the vestibule for a full half hour. He was persuaded back into the dining parlour only after Alana's hushed reminder that, left unchecked, their mother was very likely to heap further embarrassment on the family. Their table, although central, was thankfully some distance from Hannibal's, and Will was able to slide into a seat between Beverly and a dozing Mr Franklyn without attracting undue attention. Still, he could not help casting furtive glances down the room. He need not have bothered, for Hannibal did not attempt to engage him. Indeed, he appeared rooted to his seat, and seemed hardly even to look up from his plate, even when Mrs Graham and Abigail engaged in a lengthy, raucous debate about which of the dining officers looked the most becoming in their regimentals.

And the more Hannibal ignored, the more Will brooded.

*'Wait here.'*

Words spoken in softness, in promise, taunting him now, the indifference presented by the Alpha whose back was turned rigidly against him sending a clear message.

*You have been toyed with. Again. Cast aside. Again.*

Stupid, so stupid, to feel tears pricking behind his eyes.

*What did you think would happen? What did you* want *to happen?*

No answers were forthcoming. And it was untenable to remain any longer - to allow Hannibal the satisfaction of knowing that his manipulations had once again yielded fruit.

'Beverly, did I hear you mention just now that Sir James has called for your carriage?'

'Yes, Father is much fatigued. I fear we must leave shortly. Are you unwell? You have been so quiet, Will.'

Beverly's concern, well-meaning as it was, only served to increase his anxiety. Was he really doing so poor a job of hiding his distress?

'It is nothing. You know how I dislike large gatherings. I shall be well enough once this evening is over,' he muttered.

Brow crinkling, Beverly placed her hand over his. 'Would you like to come back with us? Wolf Manor is on our way, after all, and there is plenty of room in the carriage.'

The idea was a welcome one. With a rush of relief, Will leaned across the table and addressed his father in low tones. 'May I accompany the Prices back to the village?'

'Of course, my boy.' Mr Graham smiled dryly. 'I only wish that we could all go back with you. However, your mother seems determined to see in the dawn. One might wonder at her seemingly inexhaustible appetite for sweet cakes and façile conversation, but there it is.'

Mrs Graham, mouth still full of cake, merely chortled. It was fortunate, thought Will, that she had consumed enough punch to be currently uncaring of such caustic remarks, although he rather suspected that the morning might bring about a less forgiving attitude.

'I think the officers are going,' pouted Abigail, nudging Fredricka who was attempting to stifle a succession of yawns. 'Freddie, look! Colonel and Mrs Chilton are taking leave of the Vergers.'

Mr Franklyn's snoring form provided excellent cover for Will to observe discreetly. The Chiltons were fawning, Mr Verger was scowling, and Hannibal – Hannibal was looking straight back at Will, expression enigmatic.

Will coloured but did not drop his gaze.

*What care I for your low opinion? I shall never apologise for who I am.*

'Will? Are you ready?'

The squeeze of Beverly's hand reclaimed Will's attention. With a final fierce glare at Hannibal, whose amber eyes burned into his from across the room, he turned and softened his expression.

'Forgive me, Beverly. Yes, of course.'

Movements jerky and self-conscious, Will stood and bowed, muttering a general farewell to the table. His one departing consolation was a glimpse of Miss Verger hurrying towards Alana, a strangely apologetic smile on her face.

As he stood on the house steps waiting for Beverly to retrieve her pelisse, Will closed his eyes and savoured the night chill. It cooled his overheated cheeks and cut through the fog of mingled scents which all evening had assailed his senses. How terribly ironic, he thought, that the one scent which soothed and anchored him belonged to an Alpha whose manner and actions did anything but!

As if summoned from memory, fresh mineral earthiness enveloped him, transporting him instantly to the tranquil bank of his favourite stream. Sitting in the long grass, knees drawn up, head tilted to the caressing summer sun. And Hannibal beside him, a warm and reassuring presence. Drawing a

deep breath, Will sighed as he fancied he felt the light sweep of long fingers brushing between his shoulder blades. Had not they been interrupted in the garden – had those stern lips pressed against his own – how would they have felt?

Unwilling to open his eyes, to break the spell, he murmured, 'It would have been my first kiss.' And smiled with self-derision as his fevered imagination even conjured a faint sigh in response.

'Will?'

With reluctance, he returned to the considerably bleaker present. Beverly was walking towards him, her movements uncharacteristically hesitant; and as she fastened her pelisse, she eyed him with apparent confusion.

'What did he want?'

Will's brows drew together. 'Who?'

Her voice lowered. 'Mr Lecter. He left in something of a hurry when he saw me.'

Mouth agape, Will stared at her. 'He was *here*?'

It was now Beverly's turn to frown. 'He was standing directly behind you. Do you mean to say he did not speak to you?'

'No.'

*But he touched me. He touched me and... Oh gods. He* heard *me.*

Little wonder then that Hannibal had walked away. How mortified he must have been, confronted with such immature – not to mention indiscreet – mumbling.

Not a moment too soon, the Prices' carriage drew up and Sir James beckoned them from the window. As Will stood aside for Beverly to precede him, he wondered bleakly whether he – or, indeed, any of his family – would ever again be allowed to darken the doors of Muskrat Hall after such a disastrous evening.

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*'It would have been my first kiss.'*

That wistful voice had almost been Hannibal's undoing. Had Will been aware of his presence? Nothing in his trance-like demeanour had indicated it, yet why then had he spoken so?

It had been folly, of course, to have touched him. Folly to have approached him at all. But when he had seen Will standing by the open door, the need to be close, to breathe him in – one last time – had proven too tempting.

And then those whispered words. Bringing back a memory of frosted breath and warm bodies, skin soft beneath stroking fingers, dark hair charmingly dishevelled, rosy lips slightly parted…

*How would he have tasted?*

A curse hovering on his tongue, Hannibal forced himself from the breakfast room window and the view of the carriage bearing Will away. He poured a generous glass of port wine and downed it, grimacing at the overt sweetness. Setting the glass back on the salver, he smoothed back his hair and tugged decisively on the servants' bell rope.

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It was with resigned forbearance that Will, at breakfast the following morning, listened to his mother's raptures over the Vergers' incomparable hospitality and first-rate entertainments.

'We were the last to leave, you know,' she announced, slathering butter onto a hot roll with relish. 'And they were so mournful to see us go! Even Mr Verger seemed quite out of spirits.'

At that, Mr Graham glanced up from his morning paper.

'I, on the other hand, attributed their various grimaces rather to a desire to have their house to themselves again than reluctance to be parted from *us*.'

Before Mrs Graham could retort, the arrival of a rather bleary-eyed Mr Franklyn provided a convenient distraction.

'Ah, my dear Mr Franklyn! I trust you slept well.'

A pained smile was his first response to her greeting. He gave his second as he lowered himself carefully into a chair.

'Alas, I fear that the demon drink quite overcame me last evening. I am somewhat gaseous this morning.'

The thought of sitting at table with his bilious cousin quashed fully Will's already lacklustre appetite. Abandoning his plate of eggs and edging back his chair, he stared meaningfully at Alana, who had conveniently just finished her own breakfast.

'Of *course* we may practise now, Alana.' And at his father's questioning look, 'I promised to teach Alana how to make fishing lures.'

'Er, yes, so you did.' Rather nonplussed, Alana nevertheless smiled gamely and retrieved her napkin from her lap, placing it on the table.

'Oh, fair cousin!'

Halfway out of his seat, Will took one look at Mr Franklyn's hopeful expression and blanched inwardly. But he replied with restrained politeness.

'Mr Franklyn?'

'Might you do me the honour of granting a private audience in the course of the morning?'

'Well –'

'Why, of course, Mr Franklyn,' gushed Mrs Graham, dropping her breakfast roll onto her plate with a resounding clunk. 'Why do not you both go into the morning room?'

'But –'

'The lures can wait,' she asserted sharply. 'Remember your manners, Will!'

Alana squeezed Will's hand, Molly gazed at him in consternation, and the younger girls giggled. As for Mr Graham, he shrugged helplessly at his son before retiring once more behind his newspaper.

And so it was that five minutes later, Will found himself sitting across from his cousin in a state of mingled dismay and amusement.

'My dear cousin Will, you can hardly doubt the purpose of my discourse,' was his confident opening. 'Indeed, my attentions have been too marked to be mistaken. Almost as soon as I entered this house, I singled you out as the companion of my future life.'

Suppressing a shudder at the mere *thought* of spending an entire lifetime with Mr Franklyn, Will allowed himself to slip to away into the safe tranquillity of his mindscape. The cool silk of rushing water against his skin, fishing rod in hand, sun on his back. There he remained, content, as on droned Mr Franklyn, trotting out list upon list: essential spousal attributes, *almost* all of which Will apparently possessed; the daily routine of life at Fogmear, the sizeable parsonage which Lady Bedelia had graciously bestowed upon him in Kent; and finally, Mr Franklyn's many and varied reasons for marrying. It was his ponderous account of the fifth of these reasons which jolted Will back to reality.

'And it was at approximately eight o'clock in the evening, after the cheese course, when Lady Bedelia said to me, 'Mr Franklyn, it is time that you married. Choose a person of suitable rank for my sake; and for your own, be sure to select a Beta, for an Alpha would prove far too headstrong for a person of your nervous disposition.'

'But surely, sir, you must know that I am not – that is –'

Will hesitated, unwilling to discuss such a personal subject, although it was clear that Mr Franklyn had no such qualms. It seemed certain, however, that his cousin's proposal was likely to span the remainder of the morning if some sort of response was not offered.

'I thank you for the honour of your proposal. However, it is impossible for me to accept.'

Mr Franklyn looked back at him blankly for a moment before breaking into a wide smile. Leaning forward, he tapped Will's knee with an admonishing finger.

'Come now, cousin. It really is not necessary for you to attempt to increase my love by suspense. I am, I assure you, perfectly aware already of your manifold attractions. And I am confident that I will not tire of them, even over the course of an entire lifetime.'

Shifting uncomfortably, Will tried again. 'Sir, I do not say this to dissemble. Please believe me, we could not in a *hundred* lifetimes make one another happy.' And getting up, he bowed. 'Thank you again, but my answer must be no.'

'But cousin,' protested Mr Franklyn, rising rather awkwardly from his own seat, 'you cannot possibly be serious in your refusal. I hesitate to mention the unfortunate circumstances of your birth –'

'Yet you have done so anyway,' interrupted Will frostily, any sympathy he might have felt for his cousin’s plight evaporating instantly. 'This interview is over, sir.'

'Only consider this,' huffed Mr Franklyn, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbing at his florid cheeks. 'It is by no means certain that another offer may *ever* be made to you. And remember that I offer not only the security of an establishment, but also the privilege of connection to the illustrious family of du Maurier!'

The fact that Hannibal's haughty face immediately floated before Will's eyes did nothing to ease his agitation.

'Then it is a privilege which sadly I shall have to forfeit,' were his final words, snapped out as he stalked towards the door.

Marching into the vestibule, he narrowly avoided running headfirst into his mother who had, naturally, been eavesdropping on the entire conversation. Her disbelieving countenance, and the practically shredded handkerchief which was twisted around her fingers, were ample evidence of her dismay; but before she could open her mouth to begin what was sure to be a lengthy diatribe, Mr Graham appeared in the breakfast room doorway.

'Will, come here, please,' was his stern instruction.

Silently, Will followed his father into the now-empty room, standing with arms folded as he waited for the inevitable scolding.

Which never came.

Instead, Mr Graham took up his former seat at the table and unfolded his newspaper, chuckling beneath his breath. 'Well, well. It seems that my intervention will not be needed after all. Get along now, Will.'

'Get –' Flummoxed, Will approached the table. 'You do understand that Mr Franklyn has just made me an offer of marriage?'

'I guessed as much.'

'An offer which I have refused.'

'Of course.' Mr Graham lifted quizzical eyes to his son. 'You do not for one moment, I hope, believe that I would have sanctioned such a match?'

Will bit his lip. 'Even though Mr Franklyn is to inherit Wolf Manor, and a union between us would have secured our family's future?'

'Even so. Good lord, child. Should I have encouraged you to throw away your future for the sake of *property*? Putting aside the fact that the man is a dithering idiot, you could never have bonded with him. What kind of life would that have been for you?' Shaking his head, Mr Graham disappeared again behind his newspaper. 'Having said all that, I should steer clear of your mother for a day or two. I advise long walks and fishing expeditions.'

Gratitude and relief flooding him, Will hugged his father impulsively, crushing the paper in the process.

'Thank you,' he said softly.

'Careless child,' tutted Mr Graham. But he was smiling as Will slipped from the room.

***

Twenty-four hours were insufficient to lessen either Mr Franklyn's vexation or Mrs Graham's annoyance. The arrival of Beverly after breakfast the following morning provided some relief, however, for she took it upon herself to occupy Mr Franklyn in conversation, thus allowing Will to escape into the garden.

Frustrated by his continued inability to likewise escape thoughts of Hannibal, Will sought distraction, and was consequently relieved to find Alana in the summer house, poring intently over a letter. He grinned as he took a seat beside her.

'Does Miss Verger write well?'

'I beg your pardon?'

Blinking, Alana looked up, and Will was immediately alarmed by the pallor of her cheeks.

'Alana? What is the matter?'

'I – nothing, really. Miss Verger told me last night that she was going away for a time. It is only –' Sighing, Alana held out the letter. 'This is from Mrs Cordell. She writes to inform me that the whole party have left Muskrat Hall by this time for London. And without any intention of coming back again.'

# Converging

'Is it very much further, do you think?'

Will took one look at Brian's sallow face and swallowed a laugh.

'I would think not, but if you wish to stop the carriage I am sure Sir James would not object.'

'Eh? What was that?' Summoned from a light slumber, Sir James offered a vague smile from his seat opposite.

'Nothing, father.' Brian squared his thin shoulders and nudged Will crossly. 'I shall be quite alright. I am not used to such long journeys, that is all.'

Amused, Will turned his attention back to the fields which rolled past them in varying pastel pale shades. Although still early March, spring had arrived and had taken up residence with stubborn determination, shouldering aside the feeble remnants of winter.

They left the high road; and as the carriage rattled along a series of narrow lanes surrounded by high hedgerows, all three occupants gazed out with eager curiosity - for, as the driver informed them in rough tones, they had at last arrived at the boundary of Fell Park, home of the famous Lady Bedelia du Maurier. They saw an abundance of trees – clusters of oaks and elms dotting lush green fields – but as yet, no sign of the house itself was visible from the road.

How odd to think that after all his mocking denouncements, Will was soon to be a visitor at that grand establishment. Odder still, he considered, to be doing so at the behest of Mr and Mrs Franklyn...

*'Engaged to Mr Franklyn? I cannot believe it! Beverly, why ever did you accept? What were you thinking?'*

*The stoicism with which Beverly bore this unguarded exclamation put Will immediately to shame, and he blushed as he paced the morning room, but he did not retract his words. Only two days after the same offer had been made to himself? It was absurd.*

*'I am thinking,' she replied calmly, watching him from the sofa with an air of perfect tranquility, 'that I will be leaving my parents' home for the comfort of my own. I am thinking that I need no longer worry about how burdensome I shall be as the years pass and I am forced to rely on my family for support. And I am thinking, Will, that as I have never been romantic, my chance of happiness with Mr Franklyn is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state.'*

*'I am sorry.' Chastened, he moved to sit beside her, and regarded her earnestly. 'I would never wish to offend you. You are my dearest friend, Beverly. Please forgive me.'*

*'Oh, Will.' Beverly smiled, and Will fancied that he caught a glimmer of sadness in her dark eyes. 'We are very different people, you and I. But never think that I do not appreciate your idealism.' She took his hand and squeezed it. 'Indeed, it is a quality which I hope you never lose.'*

At length, the chimneys of Fogmear Parsonage came into view. Sir James recognised them at once, having been regaled with a detailed description by his then son-in-law-to-be one evening at Price Lodge.

*'This is quite a gathering.'*

*Turning, Will smiled and accepted the glass of wine which Mr Brown proffered. Dressed in his regimentals, the officer cut a fine figure, and the younger guests had been fluttering around him ever since his arrival with Mr Randall. Abigail in particular had proven difficult to dispatch, though finally an invitation from Brian to dance a reel had tempted her away.*

*'Yes, I believe that Sir James is determined to spread the news of his daughter's good fortune with the utmost speed - and it would seem that this is the most economical way.'*

*'In terms of time, yes. Though hardly in a monetary sense, given the number of empty bottles which I have already seen carried out. But no matter. It is very good to see you again, Mr Graham. I was sorry to have missed the Muskrat ball.'*

*Will felt Mr Brown's eyes travel over him with lazy appreciation and tried not to mind. Indeed, he felt frustration at the very fact that he did mind. Here was a handsome, intelligent, industrious, good-humoured Alpha, who was most assuredly interested in him; yet the only romantic inclination Will had felt thus far had been wasted on a supercilious aristocratic who had spurned him at every turn.*

*'Why did not you attend the ball?'*

*'Alas, I decided,' whispered Mr Brown, leaning in conspiratorially, 'that discretion would be the best course to take. It would not have done to have inadvertently caused a scene; and I am convinced that Mr Lecter would have created one, had our paths crossed. Still, it is a shame. I have heard that it was a rather diverting evening.'*

*Will stiffened at the allusion to events which he wished desperately to forget. He had been entirely unprepared for the sharp pain which had gripped his heart upon the realisation that Hannibal had, in all probability, persuaded the Vergers to quit Muskrat Hall on the very day of their last encounter.*

*'Yes,' he murmured, eyes on his wine glass, the rich dark liquid calling to mind another set of eyes. 'It was indeed – most diverting.'*

The parsonage was a large, rambling building of grey stone, encircled by a neat cottage garden. As the carriage drew up, Mr Franklyn and Beverly appeared, side-by-side, in the doorway of the house. Will's heart swelled as he waved at his smiling friend. Relations between them had been a little strained since the engagement, and he had half-feared a lukewarm reception, even though the invitation to visit had come from Beverly herself. But her eyes were filled only with affection as he climbed out of the carriage, and he embraced her warmly when they came together at the garden gate.

'You look well, Beverly. Truly, very well.'

The apology in his tone was heartfelt, and the brief tightening of Beverly's arms around him communicated perfectly her acceptance and gratitude.

'Oh, Will, it is so very good to see you again. And Brian. Father. Welcome to you all.'

As Beverly turned her attention to her family, Will found himself momentarily alone with Mr Franklyn, who to his credit looked neither excessively smug nor overtly triumphant. Indeed, both of the newlyweds exhibited a sort of contentment that astonished Will. Clearly there was more to his cousin than appearances had thus far suggested.

'Dear cousin,' gushed Mr Franklyn. 'My Beverly and I are pleased to welcome you to our humble abode. Tell me, how does your family?'

'They are well, sir, thank you,' responded Will automatically, although in the case of Alana, he was not at all sure of the accuracy of the statement. Nor was he the only one in the family to have felt such concern. Their aunt, Mrs Crawford, had drawn Will to one side not long after her arrival with Mr Crawford for their annual Christmas visit.

*'Alana is so quiet,' she commented worriedly. 'How long has she been like this?'*

*'Above a month.' Will shrugged helplessly. 'As I told you in my letter, she has heard nothing from Miss Verger since the family left for London.'*

*'But she did receive a second letter from Mrs Cordell.' His aunt looked at Will shrewdly. 'I have no wish to pry, Will. But if I knew more, then perhaps I could be of some help.'*

*'There is something –' Will hesitated, reluctant to break a confidence. But then again, he reasoned, Alana had never requested silence on the subject. And their aunt was, after all, the model of discretion. 'Although to speak truth, it is not a problem which is easily remedied. There was a suggestion in Mrs Cordell's second letter that the family were desirous – even expectant – of a union between Miss Verger and the sister of – of a close friend.'*

*It had been more than a suggestion* – 'Mischa Lecter has not her equal for beauty and accomplishments; and the affection which she inspires in us all has strengthened to the hope that Mr Verger and I will soon be fortunate enough to call her our sister' – *but Will refused even for a moment to give it credence. Whatever the machinations of Hannibal Lecter and of Margot Verger's siblings, it was impossible to believe that the lady herself could have so quickly and readily abandoned a regard which Will and so many others had witnessed with regularity for more than a month.*

*'Perhaps we should take Alana back to London with us,' suggested Mrs Crawford, 'for a change of scene.'*

*'Oh yes, please do. Distraction is just what Alana requires.'*

*Will felt a welling of affection as he smiled at his aunt. They had been ever close. And not only because Mrs Crawford, dark-haired and dark-eyed, was as beautiful inside as out. Bella Crawford was the only other Omega of Will's acquaintance, and had helped him through his first heat at the relatively late age of seventeen. Omegas suffered through these biological cycles only once in a twelvemonth, but for unmated Omegas such as Will, it was a trying time.*

*'And you, Will? Are you well?'*

*'Perfectly, aunt, I thank you.'*

*'Your next cycle is...'*

*'Sometime in September.'*

*'Then I think it will be safe enough.' She laughed and coloured a little at Will's quizzical look. 'Forgive me for being indelicate, Will. But you see, Mr Crawford has arranged to take a month off in the summer. He has promised me a tour of the Northern country, beginning in mid-July, and we would like very much for you to accompany us.'*

*A month spent touring the countryside with his uncle and aunt, away from the inane chatter of his younger sisters and the disappointed glowering of his thwarted mother?*

*Will grinned.*

*'That would be wonderful. I am sure that Mother will be happy to spare me.'*

*'And what of Mr Brown? Will he be happy to spare you?'*

*Will flushed, taken aback. 'Aunt?'*

*'I was watching him throughout dinner yesterday. He is clearly very interested in you.' Mrs Crawford shook her head, eyes kind but serious. 'Be careful, Will. Want of fortune makes him, alas, an imprudent match. And I would not wish your affections to be engaged without hope of a future.'*

*The irony of the conversation struck Will forcibly, yet there he drew the line. He could not possibly tell his aunt that the nearest he had come to having his affections engaged had involved a man who had plenty of fortune but absolutely no serious interest in him! Besides, that madness had been brought to an abrupt end with Hannibal's decampment to London. And so he focused instead on the issue at hand.*

*'Aunt, I am not in love with Mr Brown. To be sure, I* like *him – he is pleasant company and I enjoy our conversations. But beyond that, I assure you, you have nothing to fear.'*

*Mrs Crawford looked at him steadily for a moment before nodding in apparent satisfaction. 'I am only sorry that a warning was necessary, but such is the way of the world.'*

And such is the fault of Hannibal Lecter, *thought Will grimly.* For without his interference, Mr Brown would not now be forced to sing for his supper.

*'You realise, of course, that want of fortune is rarely ever enough to prevent two people from bonding if their affections are truly engaged, warnings from well-meaning relatives notwithstanding,' he could not resist adding dryly.*

*His aunt chuckled. 'Will Graham, you are incorrigible. In any case, I have done my duty. And now let us talk of more pleasant things.'*

The Prices and Will were shown to their rooms by a gleeful Mr Franklyn, who was eager to point out every improvement and modification, no matter how small, which had been carried out on the instructions of Lady Bedelia.

'My dear, perhaps you would like to give my father and brother a tour of your garden,' suggested Beverly, when finally Mr Franklyn drew breath. 'It is his pleasure to tend it every day,' she added in an aside to Will. 'And in this I encourage him, for it is most beneficial exercise.'

'Oh, yes, of course.'

As Sir James and a bored-looking Brian trailed downstairs after Mr Franklyn, Will followed Beverly into the morning room.

A cup of tea later, they had caught up on most of the news which had accumulated over the two months which had passed since the wedding.

'Alana is still in London?'

'Yes.' Will stirred the remains of his tea, frowning. 'I had hoped that she would see something of Miss Verger during her stay, but thus far her only visitor has been Mrs Cordell.'

'And she gave no indication of when – or if – Alana might expect Miss Verger?'

Will laughed shortly. 'Oh, she gave a most definite indication that such a visit would likely not take place at all – Miss Verger is apparently now always in the company of Miss Lecter.'

Shaking her head, Beverly moved to pour them fresh cups of tea. 'I can hardly believe it.'

'Yet so it is. It seems that you were right, Beverly.'

'About what?'

'The need to bait one's hook well in order to land the fish.' Accepting his teacup, Will raised it from the saucer in salute. 'You are a wise person.'

'Does this mean that you intend to cast your own line? For Mr Brown, perhaps?' Beverly regarded him mischievously from over the rim of her cup.

'Most assuredly not.'

*'And so tomorrow you will be in Kent.'*

*'Yes.' Will rolled his eyes at his aunt. 'I doubt that the visit will yield much pleasure, though of course it will be very good to see Beverly again. And I am glad that it has given us the opportunity to call in on you and Mr Crawford. And Alana, of course. Her spirits seem much lifted.'*

*'They are. I would that I could say the same for my nephew.' Mrs Crawford patted his arm. 'I know that still waters run deep with you, Will, but I should like to know that you are not unhappy.'*

*'Do I seem unhappy?' hedged Will, toying with the cuff of his coat in a bid to escape his aunt's probing gaze.*

*True, there was a restlessness – almost dissatisfaction – which had plagued him ever since the night of the ball all those months before. But to call it unhappiness was surely preposterous.*

I knew him for so short a time.

*'No one could blame you if you were. What he did was despicable.'*

Yet that final glance had promised so much. Before he turned and left me. Before he remembered who he was. What I was.

*'Now tell me all that you know of Miss Boyle.'*

*Will blinked. 'I beg your pardon?'*

*'Miss Cassandra Boyle. The young lady of whom you wrote in your last letter.'*

What he did was despicable. Ah.

*'You were speaking of Mr Brown.'*

*'Of course.' Mrs Crawford looked perplexed. 'Who else?'*

*With an effort, Will marshalled his thoughts. 'Mr Brown was free to choose whomever he liked, dear aunt. He and I had no understanding, although it is true that for a time he did seem to favour me. But I was never very comfortable with his regard. And it has now passed to Miss Boyle, that is all. She is Omegan, you know.' He looked at his aunt. 'And she is an heiress.'*

*'I see.' Mrs Crawford sighed. 'Then I am very sorry for her.'*

*'You suspect Mr Brown's motives?'*

*'You do not?'*

*Will shrugged. 'I suppose that even handsome young men must have something to live on, as well as the plain. But he seems to like her well enough. Besides, if Miss Boyle is content, why should not we be?'*

*'And you are not merely being brave?'*

*'No, aunt.' Will placed his hand over hers. 'I told you before that I was never in love with him.'*

*'That is lucky, but I doubt somehow that he would have acted any differently if you had been. Still, I dislike the idea of thinking ill of a young man who lived so long in Derbyshire. My family come from that county, as you know.'*

*'Well, I am afraid that* I *have a very* poor *opinion of young men who live in Derbyshire,' snapped Will. 'And of their close friends who live in Hertfordshire. I am sick of them all.'*

*'Take care, Will,' commented his aunt with some amusement. 'That speech savours strongly of disappointment.'*

***

The first two days at Fogmear passed quietly enough, but the third day found Mr Franklyn in a state of fraught excitement, for the whole party had received an invitation to dine at Fell Park with Lady Bedelia and her son.

'Do not make yourself uneasy, my dear cousin, about your apparel,' he said gravely as he passed Will's room and looked in. 'Lady Bedelia will not think the worse of you for being simply dressed. She likes to have the distinction of rank preserved.'

Will paused in the act of tying his neckcloth. 'Thank you, cousin. That is – most reassuring.'

The half mile walk across the park afforded tantalising glimpses of woodland trails – narrow brown smudges that wound, snake-like, through clusters of green-tipped trees – and Will determined at once to explore them all during his stay.

Soon enough, sprawling parkland gave way to formal gardens with rigid designs, and the party followed a beaming Mr Franklyn up a wide gravel path to the mansion itself. Restoration in design, its unrestrained grandeur did little to impress Will. Nor did the interior prove more to his taste. Shuttered passages and tapestried walls, lined with intricately-carved furniture of dark wood,

created a stifling sense of decaying opulence. A self-imposed hush descended on the group as they were led by a solemn-faced footman in black and gold livery into a large drawing room.

'Sir James Price, Mr Price, Mr Graham, Mr Franklyn and Mrs Franklyn,' recited the footman tonelessly.

Such theatricality was novel to Will, and he looked around with interest: a black carpet decorated with swirls of moss-green; walls on three sides hung with portraits of various sizes; the fourth wall taken up almost entirely by a painting of a hunting trip, with the limp bodies of swans and various fowl slung across a long table; and directly in front of this startling image, two high-backed chairs, one occupied by a sullen-looking young man and the other by a woman almost bird-like in appearance. Here, at last, was none other than the Right Honourable Lady Bedelia du Maurier.

The visitors formed a line in front of their hosts. Mrs Franklyn curtsied, the gentlemen bowed, and all were acknowledged with a slight nod by the lady and an uneasy shifting in his chair by the young man.

Will and the Prices seated themselves on a long, mahogany, green silk-covered sofa; Mr and Mrs Franklyn arranged themselves on adjacent chairs; and as they all waited in respectful silence, Will took his first proper look at Lady Bedelia and her son.

He had to own that Hannibal’s aunt cut a striking figure. Golden hair coiled high, threaded through with black ribbon, proved an effective foil to the long, black velvet gown trimmed with gold lace which fell in graceful folds to the floor. Her features were sharp, refined; and narrowed blue eyes assessed each of the new arrivals with focused thoroughness.

'Welcome to Fell Park,' she said graciously, indicating the boy at her side with a sweep of her delicate hand. 'My son, Francis.'

Will's eyes widened as Lady Bedelia's Alpha scent wafted across the space between them. A coconut sweetness, cloying, like red orchids. Whether she in turn was aware that he was Omegan, he had no idea. Her self-possession was absolute and gave away nothing.

All eyes turned automatically on Francis du Maurier, who blushed and fell to fidgeting again, but said nothing at all.

*‘Her son, Francis, will inherit a very large fortune, and it is widely believed that he and his cousin will unite the two estates.’*

*So this is Hannibal's prospective spouse,* thought Will, recalling Mr Brown's words with a sharp pang that he shook off in frustration.

Pale, thin and dark; morose and near-silent.

*Yes, he will do very well.*

The haughty tones of Lady Bedelia cut into his brooding thoughts.

'I understand, Mr Graham, that you have four siblings.'

'Yes, Ma'am.'

'How very indulgent of your parents. Of course, they were doubtless hoping for a *legitimate* male heir.' And she cast a proud sideways glance at her own progeny. 'Nevertheless, they might have had the sense to stop after two failed attempts. You may not be entitled to inherit your father's property but your Omegan status should guarantee a match of at least fair standing.'

Will heard Mr Franklyn's tactless gasp and stifled a smile. In any other circumstance, he would have been gravely offended by such a derogatory assessment, but Lady Bedelia's slow, mannered speech merely amused him. Such jarring affectation could not be taken seriously.

In any case, no chance of rebuttal was given as Lady Bedelia turned gimlet eyes on Beverly.

'Mrs Franklyn, my gamekeeper tells me that he caught a young guttersnipe leaving your garden yesterday with fresh eggs in his pockets.'

'Yes, Lady Bedelia. Mr Hobbs and I have already discussed the matter. The eggs were a gift from me for the boy's family.' Typically firm, Beverly was nevertheless respectful in her response, and Will marvelled at her restraint.

'So I heard.' Arched brows conveyed a certain amount of displeasure on Lady Bedelia's part. 'You realise, of course, that such excessive generosity is likely to result in hordes of beggars clamouring at your door day and night. The next time you have an instinct to help someone, you might consider evicting them instead. It would save you a great deal of trouble.'

Beverly's lips twitched but she replied blandly, 'Thank you, Ma'am. I shall keep that in mind.'

It took all of Will's self-possession to refrain from digging his elbow into Beverly's side, but somehow he restrained himself.

***

The low hum of everyday city life – rattling carriage wheels, whinnying horses, the plaintive work cry of a sweeper's apprentice – was a symphony at once familiar and grating to Hannibal's ears, even after several months. For all his misgivings about Hertfordshire, the tranquility of country living had reminded him poignantly of Derbyshire and the home he had been absent from for almost a year. It was too long since last he had walked the halls and grounds of Ravenstag, the estate having been left in the expert hands of his manager Mr Sutcliffe while he had tended to Mischa, filling her days with parties and excursions and visits – all necessary distractions in the wake of her ordeal.

Yet Hannibal had returned to London to find the bloom restored to his sister's cheeks, the shadows of those terrible weeks all but melted away, and his thoughts dwelt now on rolling hills and symphonies of birdsong... and large blue eyes framed by dark curls. Eyes alight one moment with indignation, the next with sweet yearning...

*'It would have been my first kiss.'*

Jaw clenching, Hannibal refocused his attention on the set of accounts which had arrived that morning from Mr Sutcliffe, scanning the figures intently and making notes to send back.

'Working on estate business again, Hannibal?'

A distracted hum was the only response given to the scarlet-uniformed man who paused in the doorway for a moment before sauntering into the study. He came to stand in front of Hannibal's desk and peered down at the neat piles of papers tied into bundles.

'How deathly dull all it looks.'

Glancing wryly at his cousin, the roguish and utterly charming Colonel Anthony Dimmond, Hannibal laid down his quill and inspected his ink-stained fingers with a grimace.

'It is fortunate, then, that it falls to my lot rather than yours.'

'It is hardly my fault that I have not an estate of my own,' protested Anthony, settling into an armchair with a sigh. 'Youngest sons must shift for themselves, you know.'

'Youngest sons of earls are hardly to be pitied, either. But I would never accuse *you* of shirking, Colonel.'

The two men exchanged brief but warm smiles. At two years Hannibal's senior, Anthony had long been his most trusted advisor and closest confidant.

'I should hope not.' Gesturing at the gold braid decorating his coat, Anthony commented dolefully, 'You would not believe the amount of paperwork that is waiting for me back at headquarters. Give me a good front line any day.'

Hannibal raised his eyebrows. 'Is there really any such thing?'

Anthony laughed shortly. 'Of course not. But I have to admit that I much prefer action and the company of my men to the foppery of London society. Come now, admit it. You would far rather be out roaming the fields of Ravenstag than cooped up in an opera box five times a week.'

'Opera has its place, but yes. On the whole, you are correct.'

Resting his elbows on the richly-grained surface of the desk, Hannibal steepled his fingers and pressed them to his lips in contemplation.

Anthony smiled. 'I am correct, eh? Then perhaps you will finally take my advice and go home.'

But at that suggestion Hannibal at once shook his head. 'Mischa is not yet ready. And I will not travel so far without her.'

'Mischa is stronger than you give her credit for. And I still cannot understand why you left Hertfordshire in such an almighty hurry,' huffed Anthony. 'I was looking forward to spending Christmas in the country. Breathe in all that fresh air, away from this damned city smog.'

Hannibal made a show of shuffling his papers. 'I told you about Mason.'

'You told me about *Mason,* yes.'

Cursing his cousin's shrewdness, Hannibal was almost grateful to hear the disdainful tones of Mrs Cordell echoing up from the vestibule, thus providing a convenient distraction.

'You came here alone, Miss Graham? Do none of your siblings keep you company?'

*Miss Graham?*

Frowning, Hannibal rose from his chair. 'I did not realise that Miss Graham was in town.'

'Hm? Oh, yes. She is staying with her aunt and uncle, apparently.'

As a yawning Anthony reached for the daily paper, Hannibal cocked his head to listen. At least Margot was safely out of the way, on an expedition to Mischa's favourite circulating library in Finsbury Square.

Miss Graham's soft, lilting voice carried clearly to the upper landing. 'My sisters are at home, and my brother is at present in Kent, visiting Mrs Franklyn – Miss Price as was – and her husband.'

*Will is in Kent.*

*Will.*

The name throbbed through him like a dull ache. Excursions, visits, trips to the theatre and to the opera – nothing had expunged the boy from his thoughts. And as for distractions of a baser nature, no smiles were as natural, no minds as fascinating, no forms as pleasing as Will's. Not once had he entertained even the possibility of taking a lover. Not when memories taunted him constantly – of heated clashes and immersive conversations, of fleeting touches and covert glances.

*Perhaps, after all, avoidance is not the answer.*

Eyes glinting with intent, Hannibal turned to his cousin.

'Anthony, what say you to a dose of that country air you are so keen to experience? I think it is high time we visited our aunt.'

***

The woods surrounding Fell Park had become for Will something of a retreat after a fortnight of Mr Franklyn's incessant prattle and Lady Bedelia's imperious litanies. The latter had increased in frequency since Sir James's return to Hertfordshire upon the conclusion of their first week. Freed from the necessity of consideration for parental tenderness, Lady Bedelia now visited the parsonage every other day to scold, patronise and instruct. This, Beverly had assured Will with a wink as they had watched the lady's carriage depart after visit number three, was business as usual.

Eager to escape the dreariness of such attentions, Will had taken to wandering the woods on the days when Lady Bedelia was expected at Fogmear – or, on occasion, while the Franklyns were calling on her at Fell Park – and he had made a favourite of a particular stretch of ground at the furthest end of the park. Here a sheltered path wound among mossy banks, twisted firs, ancient oaks and clumps of rhododendron, culminating in a rush-filled lake and grotto. This stone-clad structure had apparently been carved into the hillside twenty years earlier on the instruction of Lord du Maurier, as a wedding present for his young bride. But according to local rumour, Lady Bedelia had from early childhood suffered from an unaccountable fear of water; and so in the event, the gift had generated as little pleasure as the marriage.

'Such news, cousin! Such news!'

Will paused in the act of cutting into his grilled bone and lifted enquiring eyes to Mr Franklyn, who had bustled into the breakfast room with the air of one hoarding a secret of great importance.

'Where is Mrs Franklyn?'

'Not yet down. It is barely eight o'clock,' pointed out Will as Mr Franklyn's face fell.

But he recovered rapidly. 'No matter. It will hardly be burdensome to repeat.'

'And why would that be, Mr Franklyn? Has Lady Bedelia acquired another painting? Or perhaps a new carriage?' Will's acerbic tone was, naturally, lost on his cousin.

'Better even than that,' he beamed. 'She has acquired a new *guest.* I have just seen the carriage turning up the lane to Fell Park. Can you guess who it is?'

'I really cannot.' Wishing only for the restoration of peace in order to finish his breakfast, Will conjured a smile. 'Do tell me, cousin.'

'I would have known the carriage from the crest, of course; but in any event, I saw him looking out as it drove past. I am sure that he will call here to pay his respects, and what an honour it will be to entertain such a prestigious visitor!'

Impatiently, Will prompted, 'And of which prestigious visitor are you speaking?'

'Why, Mr Lecter, of course!' Mr Franklyn looked positively giddy.

Will dropped his cutlery with a clatter and pushed back his chair. 'I think that I shall take my morning walk now.'

But Mr Franklyn was not listening. 'I really cannot wait to tell my dear Beverly. Excuse me, cousin.' And a moment later he was gone, feet pounding up the stairs.

It was with a thudding heart that Will stepped out into the garden. A gate at the rear provided a shortcut into the woods, and he ploughed on for some time without allowing himself the dangerous luxury of thinking. But at length, having reached the grotto, he stopped and flung himself down beneath a gnarled pine, chest heaving. The mossy earth was damp yet warm; and Will shrugged out of his greatcoat, spreading it beneath him like a blanket. He drew his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them, gazing up through spindly branches into a vista of blue.

After four months, he and Hannibal Lecter were once again sharing this same sky. It was impossible to suppress a shudder of excitement. Impossible too not to recall the awful feeling of rejection that had for many weeks weighed him down after Hannibal's abrupt departure from Muskrat Hall.

The sun rose higher, glistening beams penetrating a canopy of unfurling green. Lost in reverie, Will was slow to discern the sound of boots clicking on hard ground; and by the time he had registered the significance, their owner was almost upon him. He looked around, eyes widening, and a soundless sigh escaped him.

*A splendid pair of knee-high boots... tight-fitting breeches and linen greatcoat… a high cravat framing a face of severe aristocratic beauty… angular and haughty features… a straight sweep of dark blonde hair...*

*Hannibal.*

The instant Hannibal saw him, the Alpha stopped abruptly. For long moments they simply stared at one other. It was Hannibal who finally broke the spell, with a slight inclination of his head.

'Mr Graham. I trust that you are well.'

'Mr Lecter. I trust that you are leaving.'

Hannibal's lips twitched. 'Your presence or Kent?'

'Take your pick,' snapped Will, choosing offensiveness as his best defence against the emotions clawing at his insides.

'Hm. As I arrived in the county only a few hours ago, I fear that my aunt would object most strenuously to the latter.'

'And the former?'

'As much as it pains me, I have come to the conclusion that such a thing is beyond my control.'

As Hannibal prowled towards him, Will scrambled to his feet and hastily dusted himself down.

'I should return to Fogmear. The Franklyns will be expecting me.'

Hannibal stepped into his path. 'Surely they can spare you for another half hour. After all, we have not seen each other since the Muskrat ball.'

'And whose doing was that? *You* were the one who left, not I,' blurted Will, discretion deserting him in his turmoil.

'I did.' Hannibal cocked his head to the side, eyes glittering with an emotion that Will could not place. 'Tell me, did you feel abandoned?'

A harsh laugh was pulled from him. 'Abandonment requires expectation, sir. I was under no such illusion.'

'Were not you?'

Will inhaled sharply, hands clenching into fists at his sides. 'What are you implying, Mr Lecter?'

The beautiful blue eyes that looked into his with such directness, such accusation, tugged at Hannibal as nothing else had for the entire, interminable winter.

*How glorious you are, Will Graham. And what an unmitigated fool I was to believe that I could forget you.*

It was intoxicating to feel so challenged. So alive. Greedy for more, he moved closer still to the Omega, whose fragrant scent filled the air between them.

'It would have been my first kiss,' he quoted softly, watching Will flush at his words. Eyes lingering on the boy, who hastily averted his own gaze, Hannibal smiled faintly. 'It seems that fate and circumstance have returned us to that moment.'

'To what end?' Will lifted his head, scowling. 'Omegan I may be, but I am no plaything, sir. Besides, I know very well your opinion of me.'

At this, Hannibal shifted uneasily. 'My conduct when first we met – what I said, the way that I behaved towards you – I would have you know that I have long regretted it. And then on the night of the ball, leaving you in that way, without explanation. It – was beneath me.'

'It was beneath me,' mimicked Will, affecting an exaggerated bass tone. Then, reverting to his natural voice, 'Cannot you just say, 'I am sorry, Will'?'

Hannibal stilled. *Scornful, impertinent child. Always pushing. Always testing for weakness. Provoking and provoking until...*

Grasping Will's narrow shoulders, Hannibal crowded him back against the tree where, nose to nose, he hissed, 'I. Am. Sorry. Will.'

But as Will only stared back at him, lips parting in surprise, Hannibal's grip eased and his mouth dried.

'Will,' he whispered, then, *'Will,'* and bent his head.

# Meeting

An instant later, Hannibal felt the press of a palm against his chest.

‘What do you think you are doing?’

Immediately, his hands fell away and he pulled back to look into Will’s eyes.

‘Forgetting myself?’ He smiled ruefully.

‘So it would seem.’

There was reproval in that haughty stare; and had Will exerted even the slightest additional pressure, Hannibal would have backed instantly away. But there was something else there too. Curiosity. And perhaps...

‘Shall I tell you why?’ His voice dropped.

‘If you like.’

*Ah, there* . Beneath the smart snap of words lingered a trace of haunting wistfulness. Hannibal brought a hand up to cup Will’s jaw; and when he encountered no resistance, he brushed his thumb across the boy’s full lower lip.

‘I think often of that night and of what might have happened had not Mason interrupted.’

‘And had you returned.’

A note of hardness had crept into Will’s voice. Hannibal nodded, eyes sombre.

‘And had I returned.’ Back and forth he rubbed, lightly, an almost fleeting touch. ‘Tell me that you have not thought of it too. Tell me, and I will leave you.’

‘I cannot tell you that.’

A surge of triumph was checked by Will’s next words, spoken just as softly yet with steel beneath.

‘It does not, however, alter what I said.’

‘I understand.’

‘And?’

Slowly, Hannibal dipped his head until their lips were almost touching.

‘And still I should like very much to kiss you. I have wanted for a long time to kiss you. But I shall *not* kiss you if you do not truly wish it too.’

Will’s gaze held his as the seconds ticked by, and Hannibal found that he was holding his breath.

‘I meant it, Hannibal. I am not a plaything, to be picked up and discarded upon a whim.’

‘Would you believe me if I told you that never once have I considered you as such?’

Uncertainty flickered in the blue eyes that regarded him. ‘Truthfully? I do not know.’

Feeling for once in his life at something of a loss, Hannibal began to withdraw; but to his surprise he found himself held in place by fingers curling into the front of his coat.’

‘But perhaps I should allow you the opportunity to prove it.’

Hannibal needed no further urging to close the distance between them entirely. The first press of his lips to Will’s drew from him a groan. Such ripe softness, untutored and eager. Will made a small

noise of encouragement; and emboldened, Hannibal pushed him back against the broad trunk of the evergreen, hands reaching to clasp his slender waist.

Their mouths moved together, Hannibal's tongue stroking tentatively at the seam of Will’s lips, encouraging them to part. And what pleasure then as Hannibal took his mouth, losing himself in a slow exploration of moist heat and decadent sweetness.

A deep thrill shuddered through Will. This was all entirely new and, in a curious way, felt almost illicit. *Will Graham, chasing pleasure without a care for propriety or ethical considerations* . Determined to ignore the voice of caution in his head, he slid his hands into the Alpha's hair, threading his fingers through strands of silk, pulling him closer. Unsure of what to do, he followed Hannibal's lead, shutting down thought and doubt and *why* . Now was not the time for questions. Inevitably, they would come. But for now it was enough to *feel* and *want* and *have* .

His cheeks grew hotter as Hannibal continued to plunder his mouth; and driven by instinct he began to match him, thrust for delicious thrust, taking and taking with fierce greed. A growing ache throbbed between his legs, and unnerved by his body's powerful response, Will broke the kiss. Hannibal appeared no less affected, eyes almost black as they looked searchingly into his. To Will's mingled relief and regret, he released him then and stepped away. But disappointment ran swift and cold through Will’s heated blood when he saw that Hannibal was scanning the area.

'Do not worry,' he said flatly. 'It is my understanding that the family seldom come out this far. I am sure that no one saw us.'

'You are probably correct, but as it happens I was just recalling the last time I was here.' Hannibal's voice was perfectly even, but Will detected a trace of reproach, and he felt his cheeks grow warm once more. 'This has long been my favourite part of the estate.'

Mollified and a little chastened, Will moved to stand beside him. ‘I too much prefer it to any other.’

‘You enjoy the solitude.’

‘And the wildness.’ Will smiled. ‘I think perhaps you are beginning to know me, Mr Lecter.’

Pale sunlight mottled the glassy surface of the lake, which was ringed by smudges of daffodils. Overhead, a symphony of birdsong blended with the occasional chatter of squirrels and drumming of woodpeckers.

‘It is certainly beautiful here.’ Shading his eyes, Will pointed to a conical wooden shelter perched high above the grotto. 'That structure must offer splendid views of the grove.’

'It does. And it also offers a degree of privacy.' Covetous eyes stroked across his face, and Hannibal's voice was a caress as he asked, 'Would you care to see for yourself?'

Will licked his lips. He could still taste Hannibal; could still feel the imprint of his hands, firm and sure, on his waist. Despite all that stood between them, the temptation to succumb was strong. He took a step forward.

‘I –’

'Good lord, Hannibal. Just how large is this benighted garden? I swear I have gone around in circles this past half hour at least!’

Startled, Will retreated a few steps as a red-coated officer with wavy brown hair and a cheerful, if slightly harassed expression came striding up one of the winding paths towards them.

'I thought that you craved fresh country air, Anthony. Do not tell me that you have tired of the novelty already.’ Hannibal turned amused eyes on Will. 'Mr Graham, allow me to introduce my cousin, Colonel Dimmond.'

Here again Will found himself in the presence of an Alpha, though the colonel's scent – an intriguing blend of spices – was far less pungent than that of Lady Bedelia. Relaxing, he offered a hesitant smile.

'I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Colonel.'

'And I yours, Mr Graham.'

Colonel Dimmond's handshake lingered long enough to summon a faint frown from Hannibal. But if the officer noticed, he gave no sign.

'I come bearing a missive from our aunt. She wishes us first to join her for tea and thereafter to pay a call on the Franklyns. I believe that you are staying with them, Mr Graham.'

‘I am.’

‘Well, how wonderful.’

The colonel smiled charmingly, and again Hannibal's brows drew together.

'Is there a problem, Hannibal?’

Although Colonel Dimmond asked the question with an air of complete innocence, Will fancied that he detected a mischievous twinkle in the officer's blue eyes.

Perhaps their kiss had not gone unnoticed after all.

'Not at all.' Hannibal's tight smile belied his words, but his eyes sought Will's with nothing but warmth. 'Mr Graham, if you will excuse us?'

'Yes, of course. I shall return to Fogmear directly and inform Mr and Mrs Franklyn of your intention to call on them.'

'And on you.' Hannibal's voice was soft.

Their eyes held for a moment, and Will felt a peculiar tightness in his chest. The feeling only increased as he watched the two gentlemen walk away, and once they had passed out of sight he did not linger in the grove.

***

The sole consolation of having to endure sixty-eight minutes of Mr Franklyn's verbose ramblings was that Hannibal could sit and admire Will without interruption. To his annoyance, Anthony had upon their arrival sought a chair as close to Will's as possible. But judging by the number of glances Will was darting *his* way while apparently listening to Anthony, Hannibal was reassured that he had not been supplanted in the Omega's... Interest? Affections?

He hardly knew what to call it, any more than he knew how to categorise his own feelings. He knew only that it was becoming more and more difficult to ignore them.

Will laughed at something Anthony had said, and the low husky chuckle reverberated through Hannibal like the sweetest music. Compelled finally to move, he left his seat and crossed the room, gratified to witness the blush that graced Will's cheeks upon his approach.

Hands clasped behind his back, he bowed. 'I hope that your family are in good health.'

'Why yes, thank you.' Will's eyes were soft yet filled with apprehension, the reason for which became swiftly apparent. 'My elder sister has been in London these three months. Have you never happened to see her?'

'I have not had that pleasure.'

Hannibal felt the curtness of his reply and regretted it immediately, but the lie – albeit by omission – did not sit well with him. He noted Anthony's look of surprise and wished, not for the first time, that he had been honest at least with his cousin. Anthony knew but part of the story.

'I see.'

Will's disappointment was palpable. Discomfited, Hannibal merely nodded before returning to his seat. The remainder of the visit was mercifully short, and he spent it in silent contemplation of the complicated turn his life had taken.

***

Will stood before the bedchamber looking-glass, twisting this way and that, appraising his appearance with a critical eye. His favourite brown coat, cut high above the waist at the front and falling in two sharp tails at the back, certainly flattered his shape, but close inspection revealed slightly worn cuffs and a scuff or two. Lady Bedelia would not approve. But then he had not chosen the outfit with her in mind.

‘You look handsome, Will.’

Beverly wandered into the room, pulling on long white gloves which complemented her evening gown of pale blue. Will turned hastily, blushing to have been caught admiring himself.

‘Thank you. And in return I will say that your gown becomes you very much.’

‘You are too kind.’ She glanced at him pensively. ‘Mr Lecter was rather short with you this morning.’

Will turned back to the mirror. ‘Was he?’

‘I thought so.’

Shrugging, Will adjusted his cuffs. ‘I do not think that he is entirely comfortable out in society. I was not affronted.’

The public and the private Hannibal were, he was beginning to realise, very different creatures. And despite the Alpha’s abruptness, he had felt Hannibal’s gaze lingering on him throughout the visit. It had reassured him that, whatever else Hannibal’s feelings had been, regret for the intimacy they had shared was not among them.

‘Curious that Mr Lecter did not know of Alana's call on the Vergers.’

Will laughed shortly. ‘Hardly. Doubtless Mrs Cordell and her brother sought to conceal the knowledge of Alana's presence in London.’

Never had he felt more contemptuous of the pair. But he had the strangest feeling that for some reason Beverly was not altogether satisfied with his reasoning. And a nameless fear, buried deep, surfaced momentarily before he pushed it firmly back down.

***

And so it was with perfect equanimity that, an hour later, he took his seat beside Hannibal in the drawing room at Fell Park. A newly commissioned portrait of Lady Bedelia had been hung over the

fireplace, causing much excitement in certain quarters. The lady herself was currently employed in directing Mr Franklyn's raptures with such skill that Will could only listen in amusement.

'Good evening, Will.'

A simple greeting, yet issued in tones that made it sound positively indecent. Will's instinct was to reply in kind. An imp of mischief, however, kept his countenance turned resolutely towards the rest of the party as he spoke instead in a steady voice which belied the quickening of his heartbeat.

'Good evening, Mr Lecter.'

'Please, call me Hannibal.'

He felt the warmth of amber eyes on his skin.

'You are staring, *Hannibal* .'

'Men's eyes were made to look, and let them gaze.'

Now he did turn, eyebrows raised. 'Do you cast yourself as Mercutio? But he was a rebel. Are you a rebel, Hannibal?'

The Alpha's lips quirked upwards. 'I think you will find that I am a great many things, as are we all.'

'Appearances notwithstanding?'

'Of course.' Hannibal leaned a little closer, voice dipping. 'It is possible to look without seeing, Will. When you look at me, I would very much like you to *see* .'

Will felt again the helpless pull that defied everything - pride, circumstance, even the accusations levelled by Matthew Brown.

'I could say the same,' he replied softly.

'A pact, then? To keep the word of promise to our ear and to our hope.'

'Now you are Macbeth?'

'A role for which you doubtless think me far better suited.'

Hannibal grinned and Will's breath caught.

'What is it you are talking of, Hannibal?' Shrill and petulant, Lady Bedelia's voice cut through the intimacy of the moment. 'What are you telling Mr Graham? I must have my share in the conversation.'

Will caught a flash of annoyance in Hannibal's eyes, but with a blink it was gone, and his reply was perfectly equable.

'We are speaking of books, Madam. Specifically, Shakespeare.'

‘Oh.’ A delicately wrinkled nose indicated Lady Bedelia’s disinterest as she took her seat, the others following suit. ‘I have little interest in a book. Reading is a most antisocial pursuit and I do not encourage it. Now music, on the other hand. There are few people in England who have more true enjoyment of music than myself. How does Mischa get on?’

‘Very well. Her mastery of the pianoforte is a testament to her long hours of practise, though she is particularly fond of the harpsichord.’ Pride radiated from every syllable.

Mischa Lecter was a fortunate girl indeed, thought Will with a slight pang. Whether truly a rival for Miss Verger’s attentions or not, she sounded like a most interesting person, and he found himself wishing to learn more of her. It was, of course, unlikely that they would ever meet, but the affection which she appeared to inspire in everyone who spoke of her was intriguing. Who was this paragon?

‘Such a dear girl. Of course, Francis too would have been a great proficient, had his health allowed him to practise.’

All eyes immediately turned to the surly Beta, who twitched, coloured and clutched fiercely at what looked to Will suspiciously like a book.

Do you play, Mr Graham?’

*My turn in the line of fire.*

‘A little.’

‘And sing?’

‘Not if I am given a choice.’

Will’s nonchalance in the face of Lady Bedelia’s imperious questioning drew a chuckle from Hannibal which he smothered quickly with a cough.

‘Perhaps, Will, you would favour us with a recital,’ suggested Anthony with a wink.

Will glowered but, to his credit, offered no protest. Almost the instant he was seated at the pianoforte, however, he was eclipsed by Lady Bedelia, who began talking loudly of generalities to the remainder of the party.

Anthony, staring dreamily across at Will, half-rose from his seat.

*No, cousin, I think not.*

Swiftly, Hannibal vacated his own chair, and in another instant had stationed himself by the pianoforte, effectively blocking Anthony’s view. Will’s reaction was a bemused smile, though he continued to play.

‘Do you mean to frighten me, Ha– Mr Lecter, by coming in all this state to hear me? It will not work, you know. I am far too stubborn to succumb to wearisome Omegan stereotypes of fragility.’

The faux pas had been swiftly covered, but Hannibal felt the intimacy of it with warm satisfaction.

‘Be assured that the last thing I see you as is *fragile* , Mr Graham.’

‘Oh? How *do* you see me?’ Will’s tone was threaded with amusement, though his eyes remained fixed on the sheet music.

*Stubborn, irreverent, fascinating, irresistible...*

‘Inconvenient.’

The word slipped from his lips in a low growl intended for Will’s ears alone. Will’s playing faltered and his eyes flicked up to Hannibal’s.

’In what way?’

The softly uttered response drew Hannibal closer.

‘Surely that was made clear to you this morning. You are quite appallingly distracting.’

‘Oh, I see.’

The flare of relief in Will’s eyes was puzzling, until with a jolt Hannibal realised how his comment could have been misconstrued.

*This is your fault. He doubts himself because of you.*

His gaze lingered on Will’s heated cheeks, and he wished that he could reach out and touch. But muffled footsteps heralded Anthony’s approach, and on a long exhale he broke eye contact and stepped back. Will, after a pause, resumed his recitation.

‘Whatever are the pair of you whispering about?’ Anthony glanced knowingly between them and twitched a quizzical brow. ‘I must say, you look rather – preoccupied. Should I go away again?’

‘Do not be ridiculous,’ snapped Hannibal. ‘You are embarrassing our aunt’s guest.’

‘So solicitous, Hannibal! I am seeing you in an entirely new light.’ Anthony turned to Will, whose flushed countenance belied his outward tranquility. ‘Tell me, Mr Graham, was he this – attentive – in Hertfordshire?’

‘ *Anthony* !’

Hannibal shot his vexatious cousin a thunderous glare and immediately Anthony raised a hand in apology, though his eyes still sparked with merriment.

‘Most assuredly not.’ Will leaned across the keys and addressed Anthony in a mock whisper. ‘The first time I met your cousin was at a dance, whereupon I was summarily and ruthlessly dismissed as a most unworthy partner.’

‘How shocking!’ Anthony wiggled lascivious brows at the Omega. ‘You would not have found *me* so short-sighted.’

‘Perhaps it is *I* who should go away.’

Teeth snapping together in irritation, Hannibal found himself stayed by fingers which, out of Anthony’s line of vision, curled around his hand and squeezed gently.

‘That will not be necessary,’ replied Will, blue eyes teasing. ‘I believe I am beginning to understand you better now.’

‘Beginning to?’ Softening despite himself, Hannibal gave an answering squeeze.

‘Oh, the process is ongoing.’

‘Hannibal, Anthony, leave Mr Graham be. He is clearly in need of a great deal of practise, and the two of you are nothing but a hindrance.’

As Lady Bedelia stalked towards them, Anthony gave a snort of laughter, and reluctantly Hannibal withdrew his hand.

‘Our apologies, Mr Graham. Please, allow me to assist.’

Leaning across to turn the page of sheet music, he caught a delicious waft of pine scent and was disconcerted by the urge to nuzzle into the Omega’s curls.

‘Perhaps we might continue this conversation at another time,’ he murmured.

Will turned his head, bringing their faces so close that Hannibal felt the warmth of the boy’s breath in his soft reply.

‘I would like that.’

***

Sitting at Beverly’s desk the following morning, Will was startled by the sharp rap of the knocker against the front door. Immediately his fingers tightened around his pen, but he forced himself to remain seated. It could just as easily be an enquiring neighbour as...

‘Mr Lecter.’

The morning room seemed to shrink to minuscule proportions as Hannibal strode through the open doorway, the flustered housemaid’s announcement almost comically redundant.

‘Thank you, Georgia.’ Will dropped his pen but remained rooted to his seat, eyes drawn irresistibly to Hannibal.

Bobbing an awkward curtsy, the housemaid pulled the door closed as she withdrew, leaving Will and Hannibal staring at one another.

‘I am sorry to disturb you,’ Hannibal said, looking anything but. He removed his hat and held it before him as he glanced around. ‘Are the family from home?’

‘They are all gone into the village. Brian wished to post a letter to his father.’ Nerves thrumming, Will indicated a nearby chair. ‘Will not you sit down?’

After a moment’s pause Hannibal did so, amber gaze lighting on the paper at Will’s elbow. ‘I see that *you* are mid-correspondence.’

‘I am writing to Alana. She is staying with our uncle and aunt.’

‘Yes, I know.’

Will’s brows drew together. He did not recall having told Hannibal where Alana was staying. Perhaps Hannibal meant that he had guessed. Perhaps it was a natural assumption. Or perhaps, he thought despairingly, it was no longer possible for him to recall *anything* with perfect clarity when he was in the presence of this impossible Alpha. In the close confines of the morning room, Hannibal’s scent invaded Will’s senses, curling around him and fogging his thoughts. Just as it had done the previous evening. And through all the long hours of night, when feverish anticipation had put paid to any notions of sleep. As silence fell between them, his cheeks grew ever hotter beneath Hannibal’s scrutiny, and he racked his brain for something sensible to say.

‘How is everyone at the house? Mr Franklyn was most concerned to hear this morning that Mr du Maurier has a chill.’

Hannibal looked momentarily exasperated. ‘There is nothing amiss with Francis that a dose of fresh air and a good breakfast would not cure. The boy is ridiculously coddled.’

The temptation to question Hannibal over his supposed engagement to said coddled boy was strong, but Will felt the impertinence of it and did not dare. A few kisses did not grant him the right to an interrogation.

Silence descended once again. Hannibal looked uncomfortable, long fingers playing with the rim of his hat, back ramrod straight.

Will cleared his throat. ‘Where is Ripper? I expected to see him at the house last night.’

‘He is in London. My aunt has no great fondness for animals.’

*Nor people* , Will thought. But that he kept to himself.

‘Would –‘

‘I –‘

Will found his own hesitant smile mirrored by Hannibal’s.

‘Please, go on.’

‘I was just thinking of the last time we were all together, and how long ago it seems.’

‘Yes,’ replied Hannibal, eyes darkening with an emotion Will could not identify.

‘And I was thinking of how suddenly you all quitted Hertfordshire. No doubt you were anxious to be reunited with your sister. The Vergers too. They were all well, I hope, when you left London?’

‘Perfectly so, I thank you.’

Will frowned. Surely it could not have escaped Hannibal’s notice that Alana and Miss Verger had formed a strong attachment in Hertfordshire, yet he seemed determined to avoid conversing on any subject even remotely related.

‘I had heard that the Vergers have little intention of ever returning to Muskrat Hall,’ he pressed, provoked to indiscretion. ‘In which case, it might be better for the neighbourhood if they were to

give up the place entirely.'

'I should not be surprised if they do.' Hannibal cleared his throat. 'How is Mrs Franklyn settling in?'

Hardly the most subtle of subject changes, but Will ceded with as much grace as he could muster. Alana, he knew, would not thank him for his interference.

'She seems perfectly happy.'

Hannibal placed his hat on the nearby table and leaned forward in his chair, fingers linked loosely between his knees, eyes once again intent on Will.

'Your tone indicates some doubt on your part.'

'Not doubt exactly. But I wonder whether she will one day regret having settled for a life with one who is not her intellectual equal.'

Sculpted lips pursed as Hannibal regarded him thoughtfully. 'I would have considered the match prudential for them both. Mr Franklyn has gained a sensible, capable spouse, and Mrs Franklyn has now a household of her own and lifelong security.'

'Oh, yes,' scoffed Will. 'When seen in a *prudential* light, it is certainly a good match. An arrangement founded on self-interest and convenience.'

'I take it you do not approve of such matches. Tell me, Will, how many marriages do you imagine are *not* founded on self-interest?'

Having no ready retort, Will took a different tack. 'But then there is the matter of family. Fifty miles now separate Beverly from her kin. They will be lucky to see each other even once in a twelvemonth.'

Drawing his chair a little nearer, Hannibal asked with strange intensity, 'You consider it a necessity to live within easy distance of family? I cannot imagine that *you* would wish to be always in Hertfordshire.'

At a loss, Will shook his head slowly. 'Why no, but –'

'Will, must we continue to pretend?' Shifting even closer, voice now a seductive purr that Will felt down to his toes, Hannibal reached out and clasped Will's hand.

'Pretend what?' Embarrassed by the tremor in his voice, Will dropped his gaze to the long fingers imprisoning his own.

'That my reason for this visit is to discuss my cousin or the Vergers or the Franklyns.'

'Very well.' Speaking almost in a whisper, Will pressed his palm to Hannibal's and slotted their fingers together. How perfectly they fitted, and how natural it felt to touch the Alpha in such an intimate way. 'Then I take it you wish to continue our - conversation - from last night.'

'Not only last night.'

*Sunlight glittering off the lake, Hannibal's hands, Hannibal's mouth, and a first kiss.*

Will shivered, eyes fixed on their joined hands. ‘You have been thinking of it too?’

‘I have thought of little else.’

Somehow, Will realised, they had drawn closer and closer, until their foreheads were almost touching. He closed his eyes.

‘Sir, I –‘

‘Hannibal,’ came the husky correction.

Will opened his eyes.

‘Hannibal.’

Free hand curling around the Alpha’s smooth jaw, Will nudged forward and brushed their lips together. Hannibal made a small sound of pleasure, so he did it again. And again. With each pass he pressed more firmly, lingered longer. Then an experimental sweep of his tongue drew sighs from them both, and Will tugged his other hand free to frame Hannibal’s face.

‘Open your mouth.’

‘Will.’

‘Now, please.’

Will tilted his head and feathered kisses across Hannibal’s parted lips, teasing and delighting in the Alpha’s resultant growls. He dipped the tip of his tongue inside, encountering delicious warmth and sweetness. Their first kiss had been about discovery. But this - this was about growing intimacy.

'Hannibal,’ he murmured between exploratory licks. ‘Hannibal.’

'*Will*.’

The sound of his name groaned with such abandon sparked a frantic need. Will pressed into the kiss, deepening it, moaning in encouragement as Hannibal curled his hands around the lapels of Will’s coat and pulled him closer.

Exchanging kisses of increasing desperation, they were almost in each other’s laps when sounds of laughter and talking in the outer hall alerted them to the fact that they were about to receive company.

Will closed his eyes in delight as Hannibal nuzzled his cheek before pulling away with gratifying reluctance. He stood then, and tugged Will up with him.

‘What have you done to me?’

But Will had no chance to respond beyond a flustered grin as the door opened to admit Beverly and Brian. They looked astonished to see Hannibal, though Beverly recovered more quickly than Brian, who stood with mouth agape in the doorway.

‘Mr Lecter, what a pleasant surprise.’ Beverly was all graciousness.

‘Mrs Franklyn, Mr Price.’ Hannibal bowed, quickly assuming his usual air of insouciance. ‘I thought to call on you all this morning, but found Mr Graham here all alone.’

‘Mr Lecter has been good enough to keep me company,’ supplied Will, retrieving Hannibal’s hat and passing it to him with a mischievous glance.

‘I see.’ Beverly’s tone indicated that she saw rather more than Will was comfortable with. ‘Would you care for some refreshment, Mr Lecter? I imagine that Will has been neglectful on that count.’

‘I thank you, no. I must be leaving. But I hope that we shall meet again soon.’

On that final word he looked directly at Will, eyes filled with a fire that Will was ill-equipped to deal with in company.

‘I too,’ he managed huskily, and with a final brief smile Hannibal was gone.

‘Bother,’ huffed Brian. ‘I had hoped for an invitation to Fell Park this afternoon. Lady Bedelia has a damn fine billiards table and there is naught to do here but read!’

‘Never fear, little brother,’ said Beverly with a sly wink at Will. ‘I have no doubt that an invitation will be swiftly forthcoming.’

‘Not swiftly enough,’ he continued to grumble, staring out of the window despondently. ‘And it begins to rain! There is nothing for it now but Solitaire.’ And he stumped off in high dudgeon.

‘What can be the meaning of this?’ teased Beverly, as soon as she and Will were alone. ‘Mr Lecter, calling on us in such a familiar way? My dear Will, he must be in love with you.’

What confusion of feelings rioted through Will at this suggestion. Crossing to the window, he ran trembling hands through his hair. ‘That is ridiculous, Beverly. Hannibal Lecter would no more allow himself to fall in love with me than he would consider giving up his inheritance to keep a shop. Both ideas would be equally ludicrous to him.’

‘Because of the circumstances of your birth?’ Beverly looked decidedly put out. ‘Is he really so shallow?’

‘I cannot say with any *certainty* that I know what Hannibal Lecter is. I have, I think, been permitted *glimpses* of his true self, but he wears his social disguise like a well-stitched coat.’

He felt a comforting hand on his back. ‘He was not disguising his interest in you just now, Will. Nor, may I say, last night. You were right about him - he is not at ease in general company. But when he was watching you play -’

*‘Interest* does not equate to love.’ Sighing, Will leaned into his friend’s touch. ‘And even if it did, there are other considerations besides my dubious heritage which would not be easy to overcome.’

‘The question is,’ said Beverly gently, ‘would you wish to *try*?’

‘Perhaps *I* might.’ Will shook his head. ‘But I do not know that *he* would.’

There was nothing left for Will to do except retire to his room for a period of silent contemplation. Never had he wished more fervently that Matthew Brown had chosen someone else to be his confidant. Alana’s plight he could well believe to have been brought about by the machinations of

Mr Verger and Mrs Cordell. Yet what possible reason could Mr Brown have had to fabricate such a terrible story of betrayal as he had recounted to Will, when he had declared his intention never to publicise it in deference to the memory of Hannibal's father?

*Who are you, Hannibal? Puppet master or loyal friend? Devoted brother or clever tyrant? And what does it say of me that I want you despite not knowing the answers?*

What was it Hannibal had said? *'When you look at me, I would very much like you to see.'*

Will could only hope that when the time came, and the last remnants of Hannibal's disguise fell away, he would be able to accept *all* that he saw.

# Exploring

Chapter Notes

Here endeth the slow burn!

During the restless night that followed, it occurred to Will that there was a good chance he might happen upon Hannibal in the course of his daily walk, particularly if he lingered in the grove. The gods, however, seemed to have taken it upon themselves to spite him, as it proceeded to rain incessantly for two days together.

Meanwhile, no invitation to Fell Park was forthcoming. Both Brian and Mr Franklyn fell to moping about the parsonage, casting a gloom upon the whole party that affected even Beverly's usually cheerful temperament.

On the third day, the sun finally burst through sodden clouds, warming the damp earth and gilding the fields with a glittering sheen. Perversely, now that he was at liberty to seek Hannibal out – or at the very least, put himself in Hannibal's path – Will found himself procrastinating. He took more time than usual in dressing and lingered over breakfast, actively encouraging Mr Franklyn to engage him in conversation and quizzing him over his latest composition – an inordinately long, unwieldy pamphlet on the joys of matrimony. Will's show of interest delighted Mr Franklyn and provoked all manner of curious reactions in Beverly, from delicate blushes to almost girlish smiles which she sought to hide, but which Will caught with surprise.

At length, Mr Franklyn called for the table to be cleared, that the day's activities might begin.

'I believe that I shall rewrite my sermon to include extracts from my pamphlet as you were so entertained by it, my dear cousin. Indeed, I am of a mind to encourage my fellow clergymen to do the same.'

Will promptly sent out a silent apology to the church-going population of Kent.

'I shall take a basket to the Madchens',' declared Beverly, patting her husband's shoulder as she passed his chair. 'A hind leg of pork and some fruit. Georgia tells me that her mother has been unwell. And you, Will?' There was the teasing glance again. 'I suppose you will be anxious to resume your walks.'

It was now Will's turn to blush, though he managed a spirited enough retort. 'Go and do your good turn, Beverly. It will keep you out of mischief!'

In truth, the ease with which Hannibal had breached Will's carefully cultivated defences was terrifying. Forts constructed over years to protect himself from judgement, censure, rejection – all crumbled to dust beneath Hannibal's gaze, Hannibal's touch, Hannibal's voice. And each time Will rebuilt them, the walls were lower, weaker.

As a student he had read all the cautionary tales – Tristan and Iseult, Achilles and Patroclus, Romeo and Juliet – Alphas and Omegas wholly unsuited, yet drawn together irresistibly to their mutual doom. Soulmates, it was said, would find each other no matter the odds, and despite any obstacles which fate might spitefully strew in their path. Yet Will had always dismissed as pure fancy the idea that they truly existed. 'Life is not a fairy tale,' was his scornful response whenever Abigail or Fredricka sighed over whichever officer had most lately stolen their hearts. 'You will meet another just like them soon enough.'

But was it likely that *he* would meet with another Hannibal Lecter? Or ever feel for another such overwhelming attraction? An attraction so strong, it had overridden the principles on which he had always prided himself? Matthew Brown's story of injustice had appalled him – it appalled him *still* – yet far from shunning the man responsible, Will was gravitating closer to him each time they met.

*You know it. You know it and yet you do it anyway.*

With Beverly dispatched to the Madchens', and Mr Franklyn closeted in his study to rework his sermon, Will had finally no more reason to delay his walk. There were, of course, all manner of different routes that he could take, many of which would circumvent the grotto altogether. But when he recalled Hannibal's leavetaking of three days since – the rough note in his voice and the ardency of his lingering gaze – Will felt a pang of longing, of need.

To see and be seen. To touch and kiss and... be together, whatever that might mean.

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In Hannibal's experience, while some Omegas were particularly pleasing in form, others in wit, and a not inconsiderable number blessed with both, *all* were possessed of an infuriating air of entitlement that had kept him safe for years in his disdain, and secure in the certainty that never would *he* fall prey to his Alphan desires.

Will Graham had taken that certainty and chipped away at it with every twitch of his satirical brow, every shrug of his slender shoulders, every flicker of amusement in his eyes of vivid blue.

Never in his life had Hannibal met with a *less* entitled Omega, or one who was more self-effacing. Will seemed entirely unaware of his power to fascinate and beguile, and quite careless in his adherence to social etiquette. He was stubborn, judgemental, sometimes shockingly rude. And completely, utterly irresistible.

The last two days without him had been interminably long.

'Good morning, cousin! Off on your morning jaunt? Care for some company?'

Cursing Anthony's sharp hearing, Hannibal came to an abrupt halt halfway across the entrance hall.

'Did not you promise to take our aunt out in her new phaeton if the weather was clement?'

Anthony, emerging from the dining parlour with napkin in hand as he dabbed at his lips, looked quickly over his shoulder and then back at Hannibal with a grimace.

'Show some mercy, Hannibal. I am up to my ears in household tips and poultry breeding advice and the best remedies for curing colds.'

For a moment Hannibal wavered, until the recollection of Anthony's shameless flirting with a certain curly-haired Omega hardened his heart.

'Then I would suggest a *long* excursion. Our aunt, if you recall, dislikes the practice of talking in an open carriage for fear of insect inhalation.'

'Anthony, come back this instant! What are you thinking of, abandoning me in such a way?'

Lady Bedelia's querulous tones rang through the vestibule. Anthony grimaced.

'She has Francis and five servants in there,' he muttered.

Hannibal flashed a shark's smile at his woebegone cousin.

‘But it is *your* company she seeks. I would step to it, Colonel, before she sends out a search party.’

The day was fine, the muddied paths already hardening as Hannibal strode through the deserted garden. And when cultivated lawns and box hedges gave way to uneven ground and wooded slopes, anticipation curled and tightened in his stomach.

*Be there, Will. Please, be there.*

The scent of fresh pine sweetened the air, drifting down from spiked evergreens that peacocked finery amidst their still-bare deciduous cousins. It was as if Will’s very essence was beckoning him, and Hannibal’s pace quickened.

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The hilltop shelter did indeed offer excellent views of the grove. The lake’s glassy surface reflected with mirror sharpness the surrounding trees and copious flora. Elbows resting on the wooden rail, Will gazed out across a vista of green and yellow, enjoying the silence. But as the crunch of boots on gravel broke the tranquillity, his nerves snapped tight and he straightened, eyes drawn to the path which curved away into the trees.

He knew at once the figure that appeared, for never could Will mistake such commanding grace. Heart thumping, he opened his mouth to hail the Alpha; but when in that same instant Hannibal stopped and lifted his eyes to the shelter, the words died in Will’s throat. He watched, spellbound, as without a word or sign of greeting, Hannibal crossed the grove to ascend the twisting woodland path.

Paralysed by uncommon shyness, Will gripped the balcony rail and stared out unseeingly. He listened to Hannibal’s sure, steady tread. On earth. On stone. On wood. And then…

A tiny sound escaped him as he was enfolded in possessive arms.

‘Hello, Will.’

‘Hello, Hannibal.’

The arms tightened around him, and Will leaned back into solid warmth.

‘Two days it has been. A full *two days,* Will.’

‘Yes.’ He exhaled softly.

‘I have been driven to distraction thinking about you. About this.’

A kiss was pressed against his hair. Will closed his eyes.

‘Yes.’

‘About tasting you. About you tasting me.’

And when gentle lips brushed his cheek, Will could bear it no longer. He twisted around, seeking blindly for sweet relief, and felt Hannibal smile against him.

‘Such a welcome.’

He made a sound of frustration. ‘Do not tease. Do not you dare.’ And he set his lips in a stubborn line.

Until, in the next instant, a hot tongue teased them apart.

How willingly did Will then open to him, welcoming the languid strokes and returning them with unrestrained enthusiasm.

Bodies pressed together from chest to thigh, they stumbled backwards until Hannibal’s legs hit the barrier of the circular stone platform. Will pushed him down onto it and sank immediately into his lap, thighs astride, body trembling with desire as they exchanged ever more fervent kisses. Hannibal’s hands, which had been clutching Will’s waist, dropped to caress his bottom, and on a mischievous impulse Will nipped Hannibal’s lower lip in warning. Jerking back, Hannibal regarded him with mock-severity.

‘Now that, Mr Graham, was rude.’

‘Then perhaps the next time,’ retorted Will primly, ‘you will think twice before putting your hands in places they have not been invited.’

Hannibal raised his brows. ‘Perhaps you should draw a map for me. I would not wish to stray into forbidden territory.’

Will’s own hands, resting on Hannibal’s shoulders, crept up to tug playfully at his hair.

‘Perhaps *you* should learn to navigate with greater care.’

‘Hm.’

The next moment, Will found his hands captured and drawn down gently but firmly to twine with Hannibal’s at their sides.

‘Before we go on, I believe we should negotiate terms on an equal footing.’ His eyes glinted. ‘I had forgotten the sharpness of your tongue.’

Utterly unrepentant, Will grinned and leaned forward to whisper against Hannibal’s lips, ‘If I be waspish, best beware my sting.’

He dipped his tongue into Hannibal’s mouth and it was at once reclaimed by the growling Alpha, who sucked without restraint until Will felt heat rising throughout his entire body. He pressed closer, only to whine in frustration as Hannibal pulled back.

‘My remedy is then to pluck it out.’

Will blinked in confusion. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Your sting,’ purred Hannibal, unloosing one hand to trail it suggestively across Will’s lower back. ‘Does not it lie here below?’

‘Careful,’ warned Will with a measure of breathlessness, growing harder by the instant yet unwilling to relinquish the field. ‘If provoked, I may decide to deliver more than a scratch.’

Hannibal chuckled, the rich sound a delight to Will’s ears. ‘Do I have your word on that?’

‘Most assuredly.’

Will fastened his lips on Hannibal’s again, free hand sliding up to rest on the Alpha’s chest, feeling the rapid pulsing of his heartbeat. He was now fiercely aroused, slick seeping between his thighs in a manner which he had not experienced except during his heats. The sensation was both exhilarating and frightening, but not for the world would he stop. He pushed his hips down, seeking friction against the bulge which pulled taut the fabric of Hannibal’s breeches, and at once Hannibal inhaled sharply, breaking off the kiss. Will blushed in mortification.

‘I am sorry.’

But as he attempted to wriggle free, Hannibal held him fast.

‘Will, look at me.’

For an instant, Will resisted. But when he again lifted his eyes to Hannibal’s, he was met only with warmth and desire.

'Do not be sorry. Never that. But if –‘

At his hesitation, Will squeezed Hannibal’s fingers. ‘If?’

Hannibal released him, gaze serious. ‘If you wish to go no further, then we should stop now.’

Slowly, Will leaned in until their lips were almost touching.

‘And if I *do* wish to go further?’

‘Then you must tell me so plainly, for I will not take what you are not willing to give freely.’ Hannibal’s eyes burned into his. ‘Tell me that you want this, Will.'

It was half-demand, half-question, and Will studied him with a smile that belied the pounding of his heart. Finally, he reached up to rest a tentative palm against Hannibal's cheek.

'I do. I do want this.' And then, more boldly, ‘I want *you.*'

Hannibal closed his eyes briefly and when he reopened them, he too was smiling.

'Will Graham, you are the most confounding creature I have ever met.' He hardly recognised his own voice - rough, unsteady, almost a growl.

'Funny. I was about to say the same of you.'

'Really?' Hannibal brushed the curls from Will's brow with a tender sweep of his thumb. 'Then perhaps we deserve each other.'

This time, when Will kissed him, Hannibal met him with unrestrained passion. His hands roamed possessively over the slender body in his lap, pushing the coat from Will’s shoulders and dropping it carelessly to the floor. His own swiftly followed, and when with eager fingers he set about removing Will’s neckcloth, he felt the Omega tremble.

*How exquisite you are.*

Lightly he stroked the line of Will's throat, one hand curving around the back of his head to cradle its weight as Will arched back with a sigh, baring the pulse that fluttered just above his mating gland. Hannibal pressed his lips to it, humming in pleasure. Will's scent was intoxicating, all-enveloping.

To his delight, Will appeared just as eager to explore and taste. His slender fingers made quick work of the knot around Hannibal's neck, a huff of satisfaction leaving him as he slipped free the length of cotton. Their waistcoats were discarded next, but when Will took hold of the hem of his own shirt, Hannibal stayed him with a gentle touch.

'I would not have you risk a chill.'

'But I want to feel your hands on me.'

Will's directness, coupled with the slumberous desire in his dark-fringed eyes, threatened Hannibal's tightly-reined control. Grasping Will's chin, he bestowed a lingering kiss on lips swollen from his attentions.

'You shall,' he promised, stroking Will's cheek with reverent fingers. 'Ah, Will, there is not an inch of you that I do not intend to know, in time.'

How *much* time they would have, he did not care to consider. So much was against them, not least his own conscience – Mischa, poor Mischa, had experienced too much of gossip and disdain already in her young life. How selfish he would be in risking more, if only by association.

Yet whenever he thought of leaving – of conjuring an excuse that would see him safely back in London or home again at Ravenstag – he balked, both at the notion of employing such pretence and at the idea of never again laying eyes on Will.

Will, beautiful Will, who drew the breath from Hannibal's lungs as he pulled his shirt free of its confinement and grasped the hand that cupped his cheek. Guiding it beneath the hem, he placed it against the flat plane of his stomach.

'Then you may begin now.'

Hannibal stilled, words of protest dying in his throat as he registered the sensation of smooth, warm skin beneath his palm. Slowly he spread his fingers, and smiled at Will's involuntary gasp.

'Is not that to your liking? Then perhaps this...'

Moving upward, he stroked over narrow waist and ribcage, learning the dips and curves of muscle and bone. When his thumb brushed a nipple, he felt Will tense.

'Will?'

'Do not – do not stop.'

Curious, Hannibal swept the pad of his thumb across the raised nub. It was larger than he had expected, full and puckered. A moan escaped Will, and Hannibal repeated the caress, wanting to hear that sound again. He was not disappointed. Hunger rising, he felt for the other nipple and hummed in satisfaction as he found it. Will clutched his arm, eyes half-closed, cheeks aglow.

‘They are so sensitive,’ breathed Hannibal, Will’s arousal feeding the fire within himself. Fascinated, he rubbed again, eliciting another moan from the boy squirming in his lap. ‘So beautifully sensitive.’

‘Are – are not yours?’ panted Will, tongue tip peeking temptingly from between half-parted lips, eyes now fully closed, an expression of bliss on his flushed face.

‘Not like this, I think.’

Hannibal leaned forward and kissed him, sucking that delicious tongue into his own mouth. All the time, he continued massaging the hard nubs, alternating between them.

Will rolled his hips and, unable to help himself, Hannibal thrust upward to meet him, groaning as their swollen lengths pressed together. Breathing shallow, he rested his forehead against Will’s.

‘I want to see them.’

‘I want your mouth on them.’

The words were out before Will could prevent them. Hannibal’s fingers, playing with his nipples, were sending him into a frenzy of desire. He could feel more warm, slick moisture between his thighs, and his arousal was now almost painful.

He half expected protestation, but the only sound Hannibal made was a deep sigh of pleasure as he withdrew his hand from beneath Will’s shirt and, bunching up the hem in both fists, pushed it up to bare Will’s chest to the cool morning air.

Will raised his arms, allowing the shirt to be pulled off over his head. There followed a moment’s silence.

‘I did not realise,’ murmured Hannibal, heated gaze a caress in itself. ‘Like little rosebuds.’

To Will’s delight and consternation, Hannibal leaned forward and bestowed a soft kiss atop each taut peak.

‘You did not know that Omegan males produce milk for their offspring?’

‘Knowing is one thing; touching and seeing is another.’

Hannibal’s caresses were making Will breathless again, and when the Alpha took one stiff point into his mouth and sucked, Will gasped. The sight of that sleek head bent as if in supplication was almost unbearably erotic. Will gripped Hannibal’s nape as gentle teeth grazed the other nipple, a hot tongue laving it afterwards. Back and forth between them he licked and suckled, until all Will could do was cling to him, helpless in the wake of a raging tide of arousal which demanded a satisfaction he had never before sought. When finally Hannibal pulled back, Will looked down at himself and moaned at the sight of tips standing out rosy and gleaming wet from Hannibal’s attentions. Tugging the Alpha’s head up, Will claimed his mouth in a series of frantic kisses.

‘You have never - been - with an Omega?’

‘Not yet.’

Hannibal grasped his hips, pulling Will tight against him.

‘I am glad.’

And he was. Fiercely glad. They smiled into each other’s eyes, Will’s heart skipping a beat at the intimacy of the moment. He tightened his arms around Hannibal’s neck.

‘Tell me what you want, Will.’

Another slow, deep kiss communicated his need more eloquently than words. When again they parted, Hannibal whispered, breath ghosting across his lips, ‘Are you sure?’

The hands on his hips slid around to cup his bottom, and Will hissed as their lengths pressed once more together.

‘Oh, yes. Please, Hannibal. I cannot –‘

‘Hush, hush, Will.’

Never had Will come undone at the hands of another, yet the idea of stopping – of denying his body what it was screaming out for – was unthinkable. Burying his face in Hannibal’s neck, Will breathed deeply, grounding himself in the earthy scent which both soothed and stimulated. And against the strong column of the Alpha’s throat, he choked out two words.

‘Take me.’

He felt the shudder that passed through Hannibal’s body, and the next few minutes were a pulsing blur of hungry kisses and unsteady hands. Will raised himself to his knees, shoving down his breeches and drawers, allowing Hannibal room to do the same. Propriety was forgotten, misgivings set aside. They reached for each other at the same time, and Will cried out as long fingers encircled his length and stroked – once, twice – before dipping beneath to explore and tease.

‘Please, please.’

A kiss feathered his temple. ‘Have you ever –‘

‘No, but –‘

‘Will.’ Hannibal’s voice was low and urgent. ‘Are you certain?’

Will looked steadily into eyes burning with dark fire. Aching, unafraid, he pressed a kiss to the corner of Hannibal's mouth. ‘Yes.’ Another, lingering, full on the lips. ‘Yes.’

They rocked together, kisses deepening once more, mimicking with tongues what their bodies craved. With every undulation, Will’s length rubbed against Hannibal’s abdomen, and Hannibal’s hardness brushed a moist path across Will’s virgin entrance.

Acutely aware of Will’s innocence, and determined to make his first time pleasurable, Hannibal focused on the cues the Omega was giving him. Whenever Will tensed, Hannibal eased back. When he keened and clung, Hannibal encouraged him with lips and hands to relax and enjoy.

‘Will it hurt?’ The nuzzle against his cheek was sweat-damp despite the morning chill.

Turning his head, Hannibal pressed tender lips to Will’s. ‘Only a little. And only once. We were designed for this, Will.’

*We were designed for each other.*

‘Yes.’ The word was sighed out against his mouth.

Kissing Will hard, he delved with seeking, trembling fingers for the core of the Omega’s pleasure. The rim, beautifully swollen, leaked copious amounts of slick that eased the way as Hannibal began a slow, gentle stretching. And its fragrance, sweet and fresh, caused Hannibal’s knot to swell; but on a series of deep breaths, he willed it to subside. Knotting was for mating, breeding, bonding, and this was – not that. This was pleasure, wondrous and pure. Pleasure that he intended to share with Will as often as the Omega would allow. But it could be no more.

Refusing to dwell on such sobering thoughts, Hannibal claimed Will’s mouth in another searing kiss as he took hold of his own rigid sex and gently eased the weeping head inside.

‘Ha-annibal.’

Will’s grip on Hannibal’s shoulders tightened, and immediately Hannibal stopped.

‘Never fear, sweet boy. We shall go slowly.’

‘It is too much. Too tight.’

The Omega’s voice was thick with tears, and Hannibal’s heart clenched.

‘Wait, Will. For just a moment. Wait.’

Reaching between them, Hannibal stroked Will’s softening length with one hand as he caressed the stretched, sensitive rim with the thumb of the other. Soon, Will’s gasps of pain had turned to moans of pleasure, fingers moving to snare in Hannibal’s hair, hips beginning to shift restlessly.

‘Better?’

‘Mm.’

Hannibal pushed in a little further, groaning as he was engulfed by tight, wet heat. He grasped Will’s hips, guiding him as the boy began hesitantly to move.

‘How does it feel? Tell me, Will.’

‘Full and – ah – good. It feels good.’

‘See, Will? We fit. We fit perfectly.’

‘Y-yes.’

Such pleasure Hannibal had never known. Surrounded by the sweetness of Will’s fragrance, lithe body twined around him, buried deep within his pulsing core, he felt a fierce need hitherto unawoken: *bite claim mate take.* Again his knot began to fill, the mating response deeply instinctual. And for the first time in his life, Hannibal was powerless to prevent it.

Will must have felt the swelling against his bottom, for he asked in a tremulous voice, ‘Is that –‘

‘It is alright, Will.’

Jaw tightening, Hannibal fought the almost unbearable urge to plunge his knot deep within the young Omega, locking them together, making them one.

*Making him mine.*

Such thoughts were surely beneath him, vestiges of a savage, long-dead ancestry.

‘It is alright.’

He could hear the strain in his own voice; and the next moment his chin was grasped and tilted up, gaze snared by eyes darkened to rich meridian.

‘It is glorious,’ declared Will fiercely. ‘*You* are glorious.’

They kissed deeply, writhing together, pulled inexorably towards the same exquisite climax. Hannibal gasped, cheek pressed to Will’s shoulder, shaken by blinding pleasure. His hands tightened on Will’s slender hips, holding him in place as he exalted in the high, sweet mewls that issued from the Omega.

In the aftermath of his release, Will could only cling to Hannibal, shaking, eyes wide as he registered the alien sensation of liquid warmth spilling within him. Fingers stroked up his spine, the touch comforting as he sought to calm his breathing.

‘Is it – is it always like that?’

Hannibal lifted his head.

‘It can certainly be most pleasant.’

‘Oh.’ Jealousy coloured Will’s tone and he flushed, dropping his gaze. The next moment, a warm palm cradled his cheek.

‘But like *that*? No, Will. At least, I have never found it so.’

The tenderness of Hannibal’s smile pulled another helpless sound from Will, and he tipped forward to bestow one final lingering kiss. Slowly then he rose to his knees, extricating himself from Hannibal with care, drawing sighs from them both nonetheless.

They dressed in silence. It was not uncomfortable, but Will felt momentarily at a loss when finally they stood before each other, clothing a little rumpled but restored on the whole to a state of respectability. What did one say in circumstances such as these? *‘Thank you’* seemed hardly appropriate.

He was saved from his dithering by Hannibal, who caught his hand and pressed it.

‘I must return to the house – I promised to meet with the estate manager at noon. But perhaps I shall see you tonight at dinner?’

‘I cannot say.’

Will returned the light pressure before releasing Hannibal’s hand with reluctance and following him out of the shelter.

‘It may be that Lady Bedelia has tired of so much company and wishes to have her nephews to herself.’

‘Do not worry on that account.’ Hannibal offered a wry smile as they negotiated the steep path downward. ‘I have never known my aunt to shirk company wherever she could find it. No, the sole reason for her silence these last two days has been the inclement weather. She would not have had you venture out in the rain.’

They reached the fork in the path and stopped, close but not touching as they faced each other.

‘How thoughtful of her,’ murmured Will, distracted by the boyish spill of hair across Hannibal’s forehead.

Impulsively, he reached up and smoothed it back into something resembling its usual pristine order.

‘There. Now you are presentable again.’

Hannibal stilled, an arrested expression on his face that caused Will’s heart to beat erratically.

‘Will, I –‘

But whatever he had been about to say, he appeared to think better of it, for he merely smiled and ruffled Will’s curls.

‘I would that I could say the same of you,’ he said lightly. ‘You may wish to use the servants’ entrance when you return to Fogmear.’

‘Certainly, although you have hardly helped matters.’

Pointedly, Will smoothed his hands over his hair in a futile effort to control it.

‘I regret nothing,’ declared Hannibal, amusement colouring his tone.

Their eyes met and his expression grew serious. Catching Will’s hand, he lifted it to his lips and bestowed a lingering kiss on the knuckles.

‘I regret nothing,’ he repeated softly.

‘Nor I,’ replied Will, voice catching a little as he added, ‘I never shall regret this.’

Another exchange of smiles, a final press of hands and they parted, Hannibal striding one way and Will the other.

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The predicted invitation to dine at Fell Park arrived at Fogmear Parsonage a little after one o’clock. Will fell immediately into a state of happy agitation, which luckily no one except Beverly appeared to notice. And perhaps she had an inkling that something momentous had occurred, for she limited herself to a sole teasing remark as they decamped to the morning room after luncheon.

‘I did not realise, Will, that you were so fond of Lady Bedelia’s company.’

‘My dearest,’ responded Mr Franklyn with an expansive chuckle, ‘who could *not* be?’

An hour later, the tinkling of the doorbell signalled a visitor. Will looked up in surprise – and some peturbation – from his perusal of Alana's latest letter, and Beverly instantly cast him a sly glance which he endeavoured to ignore as they rose to receive the unknown caller. Contrarily, his first reaction upon the entrance of Colonel Dimmond was one of disappointment. But the charming colonel had come armed with a proposition which quickly lifted Will's spirits.

'I thought that you might like to accompany me on a walk,' he said genially, the ever-present twinkle in his blue eyes as he looked at Will. 'It is my custom to tour the park every year, and we have a glorious afternoon for it.'

Trying his hardest not to think about how glorious the morning had been, Will gladly assented. A distraction was just what he required.

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'I hope that I did not take you away from anything important,' commented the colonel, as they crossed the sun-warmed lawn and struck out towards the perimeter path.

'Not at all. I was contemplating how I should reply to my sister's letter.' Sighing, Will shook his head. 'She seems quite low in spirits.'

'Might I ask the cause or would that be indelicate?'

Hands clasped behind his back, Will cast a sideways smile at his companion.

'Not at all. I would welcome your advice. Without wishing to be indiscreet, I shall just say that I believe her affections to have been trifled with, and I am unsure how best to offer comfort.'

Colonel Dimmond glanced sympathetically at him. 'I am sorry to hear it. Is she still in London? Perhaps she would be better off at home. The city can be a lonely place.'

'You may be correct.'

Will bit his lip on a pang of guilt. He had, after all, encouraged Alana to leave with the Crawfords after Christmas – to place herself once more in Miss Verger's sphere and thus leave herself open to further heartache.

The colonel shook his head. 'It is difficult to offer advice where affairs of the heart are concerned. To speak truth, Hannibal is better at this sort of thing.'

'Really?' Will's heart thudded at the mention of the man with whom, only hours earlier, he had been so intimately entwined. 'You surprise me.'

'Oh, Hannibal has far more astuteness – not to say forthrightness – than I, which tends to serve him well when called on for guidance.' Cheerily, Colonel Dimmond added, 'Last winter, for instance, when by all accounts it was his counsel which saved one of his closest friends from the inconvenience of a most imprudent marriage.'

'I beg your pardon?' Pulling up short, mouth suddenly dry, Will stared at the colonel. 'Which friend was this, may I ask?'

'Miss Margot Verger. Ah.' Smiling somewhat sheepishly, the officer spread his hands in a gesture of apology. 'I see that you are shocked by my gossiping. I told you that I was not a fellow to be

depended upon.'

'What – what reasons did Hannibal give for his interference?'

Numb with shock, Will barely registered Colonel Dimmond's words, or the Alpha's speculative glance at his use of Hannibal's given name.

'I understand that there were some very strong objections against the lady.'

Strong objections against Alana? Against his beautiful, gentle, honourable sister? But then she was, after all, he thought with bitterness, guilty not only of being a mere Beta, but of being related to two uncles of middle class birth and occupation, and, of course, to himself – and what shame an illegitimate brother-in-law might bring to a family as illustrious as the Vergers. Still...

'Who was he to judge?' Voice low, Will turned away, blinking angrily to dispel the tears he could feel forming. Weak tears that he could ill afford to shed. 'Who was he to determine in what manner Miss Verger was to be happy?'

'You think his interference officious?' Colonel Dimmond sounded uncomfortable.

'I think it – predictable.'

Not trusting himself to speak more, Will walked on; and as the colonel fell into step beside him, an awkward silence descended between them which Will was too distraught to care about dispelling.

*'Perhaps we deserve each other.' Liar.*

With every step, he withdrew further into himself; and by the time they returned to the parsonage, he was shivering. Walking past the morning room, he made straight for the stairs, ignoring Beverly's concerned call.

*Soft smiles and softer kisses. Liar.*

'Mr Graham appears unwell,' he heard Colonel Dimmond explain, 'although,' the officer added hastily, 'I do not think it anything serious. Perhaps we walked too far. Allow him to rest and I am sure that he will be sufficiently recovered in time for Lady Bedelia's dinner.'

*I am sure that I shall not,* thought Will viciously, closing his bedchamber door with exaggerated care before slumping back against it.

*'I regret nothing.' Liar liar.*

*Why does betrayal taste so bitter?*

*Was I a distraction or an exception?*

*Why do I care?*

And as silent tears began to fall, Will vowed that not until Hannibal had quitted the county would he again set foot inside Fell Park.

# Revelations

The parsonage was shrouded in the semi-darkness of twilight when Hannibal strode up to the front door. Hand raised to ring the bell, he hesitated, but the faint glow of firelight through the fogged up morning room window reassured him that Will had not retired early.

He did not need direction from the maid who took his greatcoat and hat – had he not seen the fire, Will's scent would have drawn him. Yet there was a sharpness undercutting its usual sweetness

which concerned him. Mrs Franklyn had spoken of Will's feeling unwell. Perhaps, after all, he had caught a chill after their morning's recklessness.

The Omega, whose eyes widened at the sight of him as he walked into the room, was certainly flushed, and Hannibal wasted no time in dropping to his knees before Will's chair and laying a gentle hand against his forehead. But there was no worrying clamminess or excessive burning heat.

'You do not have a fever,' he murmured with relief, taking Will's face between both hands, eyes dropping hungrily to the rosebud lips he had spent all day thinking about.

'Will,' he groaned, rubbing his nose alongside the Omega's. 'You confound me. I thought to see you tonight. I thought of little else all day. But you did not come. *You did not come.*'

Urgently then he took possession of Will's mouth, and as his tongue parted those plump lips to taste the sweetness within, he felt a violent shudder course through the boy, whose arms came up to grasp Hannibal's shoulders, fingers gripping tightly for a moment before pulling him close.

The fervour of the kiss drew moans from them both, but when Hannibal felt wetness on his cheek and realised that Will was crying, his eyes flew open in shock and he drew back. He studied Will's anguished face with deep concern, wiping away a fresh tear with his thumb. One hand slid around to cradle the back of the boy's head, threading into dark curls.

'Will, what is it?'

Pain-filled blue eyes met his. 'How can you ask me that? How can you *pretend* so?'

'Pretend? Pretend what?'

Will's hands slipped from his shoulders, body stiffening. 'Let me go.'

Immediately Hannibal released him, standing and straightening his jacket. He hesitated before taking a seat in the chair opposite, and waited expectantly for Will to meet his gaze, but the boy only firmed his lips and averted his face.

A chill settled over Hannibal's heart. Was this regret? Had he presumed too much? *Taken* too much? An unpleasant thought occurred.

'On your walk together,' and he swallowed an irrational surge of jealousy, 'Anthony did not attempt to seduce you?'

That drew Will's attention and his indignant gaze snapped back to Hannibal's.

'Certainly not! How could you think so of your cousin?'

Irritated by his own clumsiness, Hannibal frowned. 'I did not mean to imply that he would force himself upon you - but what else?' He leaned forward, expression earnest. 'What has caused this change in you?'

'I am as I have always been.' Will met his gaze unblinkingly. 'My eyes have been opened, that is all.'

On a low sound of frustration, Hannibal rose abruptly and proceeded to pace about the room, his agitation increasing with every deafening tick of the clock on the mantle. He stared at the slowly

moving hand.

‘You regret what has happened between us.’

‘Yes.’

Hannibal flinched at the unequivocal answer, delivered in as cold a tone as he had ever heard.

‘My fault,’ he muttered. ‘I thought to treat you as any other, knowing full well that it was a lie.’

His gaze slid back to Will, but the boy’s expression of condemnation did not alter.

‘Oh, *that* was the lie? Are you certain?’

Hannibal’s brows drew together. ‘I brought you something,’ he said finally, voice rough with suppressed emotion. ‘I had intended to give it to you tonight after dinner.’

And drawing from his waistcoat pocket a folded sheet of paper, he stepped forward and proffered it to Will.

At first it seemed that Will would simply ignore the gesture, but with a sigh he took the paper from Hannibal’s suddenly nerveless fingers. Unfolding it, the boy stared down at the pencil drawing for several moments before lifting questioning eyes to Hannibal.

‘Achilles lamenting the death of Patroclus.’

‘Whenever he is mentioned in The Iliad, Patroclus seems to be defined by his Omegan status,’ murmured Will, returning his attention to the sketch. ‘He lived only for his Alpha, becoming Achilles on the field of war – he even died for him there, wearing his armour.’

‘He did.’

Hannibal found himself pinned again by that sharp blue gaze.

‘Is this how you see me, Hannibal? As a biddable Omega, ready to become only what you wish me to be?’

‘Of course not.’ Disquieted, Hannibal ran a hand through his hair. ‘Achilles wished that all Greeks would die, so that he and Patroclus could conquer Troy alone. He wanted no other.’

‘You see Achilles and Patroclus as equals?’

‘I do.’

‘And what of us, Hannibal?’ Eyes hardening, Will refolded the paper and held it out to him. ‘Do you see *us* as equals? Do you see *me*, truly, as I am?’

Ignoring Will’s outstretched hand, Hannibal knelt once more before him. Their eyes were level as he replied, with all the sincerity in his heart, ‘I admit that I have not always seen how exceptional and rare a person you are. I admit to utter idiocy in ever thinking that I could walk away from you.’ Tentatively, he reached for Will’s hand. ‘I admit that I had little notion, until I looked for you tonight only to be denied your company, of what it is precisely that has me in its grip.’

‘And what might that be?’ Will’s voice was almost a whisper.

‘Something that I have struggled against in vain, that will not be repressed.’

Hannibal smiled tenderly at the solemn boy – a boy of unparalleled beauty with raven curls, with an intellect of exquisite sharpness, and with eyes that pierced his very soul. And the words tumbled from him, newly born yet fully formed.

‘Love. An *ardent* love that I can no longer deny. So yes, I see you, Will Graham. I love you. And I wish more than anything in this world to marry you.’

Will’s astonishment was beyond expression. For a moment – one glorious moment – he was filled with a joy so intense, he could barely breathe. Hannibal loved him. Hannibal wished to *marry* him. Hannibal Lecter, who could have anyone he desired, desired *him* above all others.

And yet...

*‘Something that I have struggled against... that will not be repressed...that I can no longer deny.’*

‘You do not *want* to love me,’ he stated flatly, withdrawing his hand. ‘You do not want *any* of this, do you, Hannibal?’

A faint frown puckered Hannibal’s brow. ‘I want *you*. Admittedly, I have had misgivings about pursuing you, but that is only because there has been more to consider than my personal happiness. Besides which, guardianship of the Lecter legacy is no small responsibility.’

‘And marrying me would endanger that legacy?’

‘I do not know that it would.’ Hannibal sighed. ‘I do not know that it would not.’

Will flinched. ‘Because of the circumstances of my birth and my less than desirable family connections.’

‘Will –‘

‘Tell me that I am wrong.’

Slowly, Hannibal rose to his feet, a myriad of emotions playing across his face. The silence between them was deafening.

‘This is not sustainable.’

Will spoke with care, observing almost detachedly the flash of pain in Hannibal’s eyes.

‘Because for a time I allowed judgement to overrule inclination? The obstacles which face us are real, Will.’

‘They are real in *your* estimation,’ retorted Will bitterly. ‘And it seems that their reach is long.’

‘Meaning?’

His jaw clenched. ‘Meaning that, your *scruples* aside, no amount of inclination on *my* part could induce me to accept the man who has been the means of ruining, perhaps forever, the happiness of

a most beloved sister.'

Hannibal seemed to catch his words with surprise and no little amount of discomfiture. 'I assure you that was never my intention.'

'Yet you sought actively to divide them,' scoffed Will. 'Did you believe that, once parted, they would simply forget about each other?'

'I assume that you have been speaking with my cousin.'

Displeasure was writ large in Hannibal's face, and Will leapt at once to the colonel's defence.

'He did not know that he was talking of my sister, as you must be aware. You did, after all, keep the particulars of the case from him.'

'I wished only to inform him of Margot's situation, not to gossip.' Lips thinning, Hannibal muttered, 'It seems that he had no such qualms.'

'You speak of qualms when you separated two people in such a callous and calculating way?' Infuriated, Will stared at him.

'They had been acquainted for a mere handful of weeks.' There was an edge now to Hannibal's voice and he turned away, prowling to the fireplace, hands clasped tightly behind his back. 'I had no reason to believe that their attachment was deeply felt.'

'You did not *wish* to believe it.' Voice cracking with emotion, Will rubbed shaking hands over his face. 'You do not deny then that you did this?'

On a harsh exhale, Hannibal faced him once again. 'What would you have me say, Will? That I regret my choices? I cannot. I acted in the best interests of my friend.'

'And Matthew Brown? Was it in *his* best interests that you acted when you broke your word and reneged on your late father's promise?'

Fury and disappointment had loosened his tongue and Will could hold back no longer. He rose from his chair, trembling with outrage as he stared accusingly at Hannibal.

'When so doing reduced Mr Brown to a state of comparative poverty?'

'You take an eager interest in that *gentleman's* concerns.'

Tone icy, eyes storm-darkened, Hannibal was once again the haughty stranger who had berated Will for trespassing on Verger land. A vast gulf seemed to have opened between them, and tears stung Will's eyes at the emembrance of whispered endearments and tender touches.

*'We fit perfectly.'*

*'It is glorious.'*

The memories of what they had shared mere hours before mocked him, and he closed his mind against them. Ashes now, scattered to the winds.

‘His misfortunes have been such that I could not *help* but take an interest.’ Matching Hannibal’s coldness, Will sought refuge in disdain. ‘Any *feeling* person would.’

‘No doubt.’ Hannibal’s lip curled in derision. ‘His *misfortunes*, after all, have been great indeed.’

‘And of your infliction!’

‘Apparently.’

‘Undoubtedly.’

Outraged blue eyes clashed with molten amber. The air hummed with tension, and for a moment they faced one another in silence.

Grim-faced, Hannibal stepped back, steely gaze holding Will captive. ‘So you would condemn me as a monster when only this morning you were content to overlook these alleged offences. Tell me, Will, what is your design in refusing me? Has my honest confession of the dilemma I have struggled with injured your pride so much? Is it really so fragile? Or are you playing the coquette, hoping with these games to increase your desirability?’

‘How dare you?’ Tears rose to his eyes and Will blinked them away angrily, jaw working, fists clenched. ‘How *dare* you ask me that? I did not know this morning of your hand in my sister’s misery. I trusted you. I *needed* to trust you.’

‘Will –‘

Hannibal paled but Will pressed on mercilessly.

‘I suppose you considered it a sin of omission. But betrayal is betrayal, Hannibal. Besides, if my pride was so easily bruised, do you think I would ever have come near you again after your behaviour at the Red Dragon assembly? *By-blow*, was not it?' In his fury and anguish, he almost spat the word. ‘And as for games, they are *your* province, not mine. I have seen the games *you* play - the lives you rearrange for your own amusement.’ Boldly he took a step forward, chin thrust mutinously high. ‘Tell *me*, Hannibal. Was I part of that? Did it amuse you to take a tumble with the illegitimate Omega?’

Hannibal drew his breath in a hiss, expression thunderous. ‘I asked you to *marry* me.’

‘Against your will. Against your judgement.’ Will laughed hollowly. ‘You say that you see me. But you do not want *all* that I am.’

‘Really?’ Hannibal’s eyes glittered dangerously and he too stepped closer. ‘Do not I?’

Will hardly heard him, lost in a fog of misery. ‘Did you think you could change me? Perhaps invent for me a past that would make me more socially acceptable? Or would you have simply hidden me away from your friends?’

‘Of course not.’

It was a soft snarl but Will felt the reverberations down to his bones. Their closeness was such that he could feel the heat emanating from the Alpha’s skin, a heat that he had pressed close to and rubbed against in a haze of pleasure. *This morning. Only this morning.* Gritting his teeth, he stalked towards the door before facing Hannibal again.

‘Ah, no, because I am, after all, aesthetically pleasing. And are not aesthetics of greater importance than any ethical considerations?’ Scornful, he raked condemning eyes over the proud Alpha who stood now as stiff and unyielding as marble. ‘That, Hannibal, is *your* design.’

‘And this is your opinion of me.’ Never had Will heard him speak with such glacial hauteur and it sent a shiver through him. ‘This is the estimation in which you hold me.’ Hannibal paused, head tilted as if in thought. ‘Perhaps mundane flattery would have suited you better. You could have stayed blind – persuaded yourself that I could rejoice in the inferiority of your connections.’

The words cut through him with such mercilessness that Will felt them as a physical pain, and he let out an involuntary whimper. At the same instant, regret darkened Hannibal’s eyes and he started forward as if to reach out, but Will immediately stumbled backwards, hands closing on the door edge behind him.

‘Do not,’ he choked out. ‘Do not ever touch me again.’

‘I am sorry.’ Hannibal regarded him bleakly from across the room. ‘That was unworthy of me. I was angry, Will. I should have spoken only from my heart.’

*Unworthy. Something that I have felt all my life. I thought you were different. I thought that I...*

Will could barely breathe. He felt eviscerated, sundered by a hurt so deep it had left him raw. Lifting anguished eyes to Hannibal’s, he summoned his final reserves of strength.

‘You are mistaken, Mr Lecter.’ He spoke slowly, every word an effort. ‘The mode of your declaration merely spared me the concern which I might have felt in refusing you, had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner.’

He ignored Hannibal’s swift intake of breath and ploughed on.

‘From the very beginning, I saw only too clearly your arrogance and conceit – your selfish Alpha disdain – and your words this evening have served to confirm what first I felt to be true all those months ago.’ Vicious in his pain, Will hissed out, ‘You are the last Alpha in the *world* whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry.’

He grasped the door handle, holding onto it as if it were a lifeline, and when next he spoke his voice was devoid of emotion.

‘I want you to leave now. And from this day, I do not want to know where you are or what you do. I do not want to think about you anymore.’

As Hannibal stood looking back at him, all remaining traces of colour drained from his face.

With a sigh, Will averted his eyes. ‘Goodbye.’

At that, finally, Hannibal moved. In the doorway, however, he stopped and cleared his throat, facing Will with strained composure.

‘My apologies. I perfectly comprehend your feelings, and have now only to be ashamed of what my own have been. Forgive me for having taken up so much of your time, and accept my best wishes for your health and happiness.’

With an abrupt nod he hastily left the room, and Will swung the door shut behind him, closing it with a gentle click. He pressed his forehead against the wood, listening as a few muttered words and the opening of the front door signalled Hannibal's departure from the house.

'Goodbye,' he whispered into the grain, as a solitary tear tracked down his face. 'Goodbye, Hannibal.'

***

The vestibule, cast in shadows, was mercifully empty when Hannibal returned to Fell Park, the muffled strains of a pianoforte from behind the drawing room door indicating that the evening's entertainment was still underway.

Entertainment. The idea mocked him. And the thought of joining them... He pressed the heels of his hands against his temples before raking his fingers none too gently through his hair. Tonight he would see no one. And tomorrow – tomorrow...

The library door opened, candlelight casting a dim glow behind the silhouette of the man who peered out, cradling a half-filled goblet.

'Ah, good, you are back. Care to join me for a glass of port?'

Hardly trusting himself to reply, Hannibal strode towards the staircase, boots echoing harshly on the marble floor.

'Hannibal?'

'I am leaving. At first light.'

'What the devil –'

Hannibal stopped and spun around to fix his cousin with a baleful glare.

'I said that I am *leaving*, Anthony. Have the goodness to ring for my valet.'

'Hannibal, wait.'

Face etched with concern, Anthony held out his glass. 'Here. At least take this. You look as if you need it far more than I.'

Wavering momentarily between the desire to completely ignore his loose-tongued cousin and the urge to throw the proffered drink back in his face, Hannibal settled for stalking past him into the library, plucking the glass from his fingers as he passed.

Once inside the dimly-lit room, warm from the crackle of wood still ablaze in the hearth, Hannibal dropped into one of the high-backed armchairs that flanked the hearth. He lifted the glass to his lips with an unsteady hand, drained the contents in one swallow and set the goblet down none too gently at his feet. Closing his eyes, he passed his hand over them and waited for the inevitable inquisition. But it never came.

When finally he looked up again, it was to find Anthony observing him from the other chair.

'Better?'

‘*Better* is a relative term,’ he muttered, directing his morose gaze to the greedy flames.

‘Hm. I take it he said no.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ he snapped, sitting upright with a jerk and knocking over the empty glass.

Anthony snorted. ‘I am not a fool, cousin. One would have to be blind not to realise how you feel about our young Mr Graham. When he is in the same room, you scarce take your eyes from him. Or indeed,’ he added mischievously, ‘your hands.’

‘Do not be crass, Anthony.’ But there was no bite to Hannibal’s words.

*‘Do not ever touch me again.’*

The look of utter devastation on Will’s face – the vulnerability and pain in his eyes – haunted him.

*‘I do not want to think about you anymore.’*

‘Hannibal?’ Gently. ‘What happened?’

A sigh shuddered through him. ‘*I* happened. I hurt him, Anthony, with words I shall not now repeat.’

Anthony shook his head. ‘Then I am sorry. Contrary to what you may have thought, cousin, I had hoped that you had found your match in Will Graham, but I feared it was not to be.’

Hannibal laughed shortly. ‘Because we belong in different spheres? See the world in different ways?’

‘Because you spend far too much time building walls, Hannibal.’ Leaning forward, hands clasped, Anthony addressed him earnestly. ‘It is natural to want to see if anyone is clever enough to climb over them. But it is no easy thing to know you.’

Hannibal’s eyes narrowed. ‘I thought that he did know me. I thought that we knew each other. I wanted, more than anything in this world, to be with him. But fate and circumstance – and my own folly – have decreed otherwise.’

‘And you are content with that?’ Anthony huffed an incredulous laugh. ‘When did *you* ever allow anything to stand in the way of what you wanted?’

‘When what – *who* – I want does not want *me*. Not anymore.’ His jaw tightened, the recollection of Will’s smooth, delicately-fragranced skin beneath his fingertips a tormenting reminder of what he had lost. ‘He thinks me a *monster*, Anthony.’

‘Then *change* that. Do what you must. But do not run away from this, Hannibal.’

‘We leave in two days’ time in any case.’ His heart clenched at the thought.

‘Then make them count,’ Anthony advised sombrely. ‘Make them count, Hannibal.’

***

Morning brought for Will no relief from the tumult of his feelings, and after an early solitary breakfast he set out on a long ramble. He had managed to avoid Beverly by retiring early the previous evening, but he knew that he would have to face her sooner or later; and when he did, he wished it to be with a face unravaged by tear-stains and sleeplessness. The freshness of the air soon revived him, though as he walked he continued to dwell in minute detail on the confrontation of the previous evening.

That Hannibal should be in love with him – so much in love as to wish to marry him in spite of all the objections which had made him prevent Miss Verger's marrying Alana – was almost beyond comprehension. A traitorous part of him thrilled at the knowledge, yearning even after all that had passed between them to go to Hannibal and accept him on any terms he chose to lay down.

*Weak little Omega! Where is your pride? And what of his shameless interference in Alana's life? His unforgivable cruelty towards Matthew Brown, which he has not once sought to deny?*

These agitated reflections continued until he realised with dismay that his feet had directed him to the one spot he wished to avoid. The grotto and its hilltop shelter rose before him, and below them paced the figure of a man. Will stopped dead, unable to prevent a pained gasp from escaping his lips. At once, the man looked up.

'Will!'

Heart sinking, he fixed his eyes on the ground as a familiar pair of boots stopped in front of him.

'Will.'

When the soft entreaty did not work, Will found his chin being tilted gently by a finger that was at once withdrawn.

'You look terrible,' was Hannibal's brusque assessment.

'You look worse.'

Their eyes met and held, a ghost of a smile passing between them.

'I have no doubt.'

But even deep smudges of fatigue beneath his eyes and lines of strain around his mouth could not disguise the stark beauty of the man, and Will ached for him even as he berated himself for it.

'I have been walking in the grove some time in the hope of meeting you.'

With a grave air which set Will's heart to beating rapidly again, Hannibal withdrew from the pocket of his greatcoat a sealed document, which he held out.

'Will you do me the honour of reading that letter?'

Their fingers brushed as Will took the envelope, and he froze. But Hannibal, expression tightening minutely, merely bowed and walked briskly away. Will waited until he was out of sight, then with trembling fingers opened the letter. It was dated from Fell Park, at five o'clock in the morning, and was as follows:

*Dear Will,*

*Be not alarmed that this letter contains any repetition of those sentiments, or renewal of those offers, which were last night so disgusting to you. I have every intention of honouring your wishes, and after this day I shall trouble you no longer, but before I depart Kent I wish to answer the charges laid against me.*

*The first was that, regardless of their feelings, I sought to separate Miss Verger from your sister, and it is this offence that I shall first address.*

*I had not been long in Hertfordshire before I saw, as doubtless did many others, that Margot preferred your eldest sister to any other person in the county. But it was not until the dance at Muskrat Hall that I realised the seriousness of her attachment. It was there, if you recall, when I had the honour of dancing with you, that Sir James Price intimated that there had arisen a general*

*expectation of their marriage. Margot is gregarious but modest, and I felt no little concern for her, lest what could merely have been overtures of friendship had been misinterpreted. In short, I wished to save her from embarrassment.*

*I undertook to observe my friend's behaviour more closely, and I quickly perceived that her partiality for Miss Graham was beyond what I had ever witnessed in her. Your sister I also watched. Her look and manners were open and cheerful, but I could detect no particular symptoms of regard, and as the evening wore on I became convinced that any tenderness of feeling was entirely on Margot's side. Perhaps, as you intimated last night, I saw only what I wished to see. Your superior knowledge of your sister must make it probable.*

*As to my objections to the idea of a union between them, they were not merely on the grounds of want of connection or disparity in status. I am not as shallow as you might suppose, Will, although I admit that for a time I did allow such slight concerns to influence my thinking.*

*But of far more import was the question of propriety. And here I must beg your pardon, for it pains me to offend you. Still, I promised myself that I would be utterly honest, and so I shall be. It was my belief that your father's long ago indiscretion, while hardly uncommon, had made your family vulnerable to possible scandal. The behaviour of your mother when (forgive me) intoxicated was hardly reassuring of her discretion. And while I was prepared to risk gossip and innuendo on my own behalf, I could not endure the thought of those closest to me suffering the same if it could be avoided. I have experienced first-hand the pain of witnessing a loved one's social humiliation. It is a brutal thing, and I told myself that I would be a poor friend indeed if I did not do all in my power to prevent it from happening to Margot.*

*And so yes, I parted them. And once we were in London, it was not difficult to persuade Margot that she was needed far more* there *than in Hertfordshire. My sister, indeed, had been left alone for far too long, and Margot's cheerful company was just the tonic she required.*

*One thing more I must confess, and I do so with a heavy heart, for doubtless it will cause you to think even less of me. Two weeks before my arrival in Kent, I learned of your sister's being in town. This information I concealed from Margot, and she is ignorant of it still. Perhaps this was beneath me, but it is done. It may be for the best to allow each to go on with their own lives and leave the rest to fate. I write this not to absolve myself of responsibility; rather, I recognise that I have been guilty of high-handed interference, and I would wish to avoid compounding my error in judgement.*

*With respect to that other, more weighty accusation, of having injured Mr Brown, I can only refute it by laying before you the whole of his connection with my family.*

*Matthew Brown is the son of a very respectable man who undertook the management of the Ravenstag estate when my father inherited it twenty years ago. Mr Brown's wife had recently died, and he had been left alone to care for his five-year-old son. My father's kind heart was touched by the plight of this motherless boy, and he sought to help raise him up in the world by supporting his education. More than that, my father became his godfather, and for some years Matthew and I were good friends.*

*Over time, however, I became aware that he was not all that he seemed. The mask that he wore in public and in the presence of his godfather began to slip more and more when we were in only each other's company, until eventually I came to the realisation that within Matthew there lurked something vicious and savage – and that his propensities were such that they would have horrified both his father and mine.*

*Five years ago, my beloved father died. Matthew's father had already succumbed to illness, and my father's concern for the orphan was such that he asked me on his deathbed to aid Matthew in his purported ambition to take orders. This I immediately set about doing, despite my misgivings, and Matthew was granted a legacy of one thousand pounds and promised the position of clergyman in our family's parish as soon as the living fell vacant.*

*Shortly afterwards, however, Matthew wrote to me and stated his intention to study the law. He requested monetary compensation in lieu of the church living, and while I* wished *rather than* believed *him to be sincere, I agreed to his proposal. Accepting a gift of three thousand pounds, Matthew resigned his claim to the living, and for three years all communication between us ceased. He settled in London, and it was not long before rumours of his gambling and dissipated lifestyle reached me from concerned friends. When our family living fell vacant upon the death of the incumbent, I was not wholly surprised to receive a letter from Matthew requesting said living. He informed me that he had no longer a desire to study the law, and was resolved, after all, on being ordained.*

*I hope that you will not blame me for refusing his request, and for resisting his subsequent entreaties, which grew more vociferous and resentful by the week. Eventually, his letters stopped and I heard no more of him. Until, that is, last summer. And I must now mention a circumstance which I would wish to forget myself, and which I have not related to any other person besides Anthony Dimmond.*

*My sister, who is now sixteen, was much affected by being rendered an orphan at a young age. She was not my child, but she was my charge, and for a long time I kept her close to me, wishing only to protect her in her fragile state.*

*I share her guardianship with Colonel Dimmond, who is my mother's nephew, and last year we acceded to Mischa's long-felt wish for a measure of independence by installing her in our family's London residence with a companion, a Mrs Hobbs. It was at this lady's suggestion that the pair took a trip to Ramsgate, and thither also went Matthew Brown, undoubtedly by design. It transpired afterwards that a prior acquaintance existed between him and Mrs Hobbs, in whose character we were most unhappily deceived.*

*Mr Brown undertook to court my sister, who was then but fifteen, and persuaded her to consent to an elopement. I arrived at their boarding house unexpectedly, mere hours before the intended elopement was to take place, and when my knocking proved fruitless, I entered Mischa's room to find my sister cowering beside the bed, dress torn and face white, Matthew Brown standing over her.*

*You too are a brother to sisters, Will. You therefore can imagine what I felt and how I acted.*

*Mr Brown's chief object was unquestionably my sister's fortune of thirty thousand pounds, although I suspect that the prospect of avenging himself on me was also a strong inducement. Mischa is Omegan, as was our mother, and had Mr Brown succeeded in his plan of bonding with her, his revenge would have been complete indeed.*

*I hope, Will, that you will acquit me henceforth of cruelty towards Mr Brown. I have no doubt that he presented himself to you very differently, and I do not wonder at his ability to deceive you and so many others. I have, after all, witnessed at first-hand his talent for mimicry.*

*Perhaps I should have related all of this to you last night, but I was not then master of my emotions. I know that in my arrogance I hurt you deeply. I withheld certain truths from you – I took from you*

*without giving wholly of myself – and I regret that more than I can express.*

*No matter how much I wish it, however, I cannot reverse time. All that I can do is hope that one day you will find it in your heart to forgive me. As a beginning, I shall endeavour to find some opportunity of putting this letter in your hands in the course of the morning. Tomorrow I leave for our London residence. I tell you this because I want you to know where you can find me, should ever you be in need. One thing more I shall add, without agenda or hope of return.*

*I love you.*

*Hannibal Lecter.*

# Ravenstag

As the carriage meandered along a succession of quiet, leafy lanes, Will watched for the first appearance of Ravenstag Woods with a mixture of trepidation and anticipation; and when at length it turned in at the lodge, passing between a set of ornate golden gates, his spirits were in a high flutter.

The park was large, densely-wooded on one side with a wide stream on the other. For half a mile they drove through lush parkland on which grazed sheep and, beneath a cluster of oaks, a herd of

red deer.

And suddenly, from around a curve in the lane, they were granted their first glimpse of Ravenstag House. It was a large, handsome building of cream stone, windows adorned with gold leaf catching the sunlight. Baroque in design, the gracious building stood on rising ground, backed by a ridge of high woody hills. The stream, in front, flowed harmoniously through a landscape which blended artful design with natural splendour.

'Beautiful, is not it?' declared Mrs Crawford, voice bursting with pride for the county of her youth.

'Yes,' murmured Will, eyes fixed on the gracious lines of the house. 'It is – enchanting.'

Unconsciously, his hand drifted to his coat pocket, and he slipped his thumb inside to stroke across the dog-eared edges of the letter which he had carried around every day for the last four months.

*'I want you to know where you can find me, should ever you be in need. One thing more I shall add, without agenda or hope of return.*

*I love you.'*

These final lines he knew by heart. They sang to him, easing the ache of loneliness in his chest. Spring had passed into summer without news or sign of Hannibal, yet the mere knowledge of the Alpha's regard for him was a treasure to be cherished. Because despite his misgivings, Hannibal had wanted him. Hannibal loved him. And so although, upon reuniting with Alana at Wolf Manor, Will had related *some* of the particulars of those days in March, the letter itself had remained tucked away.

*'I am sorry, Will. Mr Lecter was wrong to have spoken so of your background.'*

*Eyes grave with concern, Alana sat on the edge of Will's bed as he leaned against the window frame and gazed out of the open casement at the patchwork of stars above.*

*'I confess, I was angrier than I have ever been in my life when he spoke as though any union between us would be reprehensible.'*

*'You are not angry now?'*

*'I feel that I understand him better now.' Absently, Will traced Orion's bow with his forefinger. 'His sister suffered cruelly. But what is that when there is entertainment to be had? Small town gossip-mongers are bad enough. One can only imagine the mercilessness of London society.'*

*'It is true that his consideration for his sister does him credit. Although,' added Alana with spirit, 'the manner in which he couched his proposal leaves much to be desired.'*

*'Yes, I do recall,' replied Will dryly.*

*'Still, how disappointed he must have been by your refusal.'*

*'Indeed,' snorted Will, 'I am heartily sorry for him.' And on his sister's reproachful glance, 'Understanding goes only so far in excusing his behaviour. He was intolerably arrogant in his assumption that I would accept him because he had deigned to make me an offer. And what of the part he played in separating you and Miss Verger?'*

*Alana looked pained. 'You make too much of this, Will. There never was any formal understanding between Miss Verger and myself. We enjoyed each other's company; and perhaps, had she stayed... but it is pointless to conjecture.' She sighed, then smiled brightly, and Will's heart ached for his sister's determined forbearance. 'I shall remember her as the most amiable person of my acquaintance, but that is all. Please think no more of it.'*

For hours he had wandered after meeting with Hannibal in the grove, reading and re-reading the letter: exclaiming anew over the impertinent conclusions which Hannibal had drawn about Alana, whose only fault had been to show a natural modesty; blushing with mortification at the realisation that he himself had played beautifully into Mr Brown's hands, his prejudice against Hannibal a convenient tool for the other man's manipulations. Iniquitous behaviour had gone unchecked and had even been encouraged.

*I could not have been more wretchedly blind.*

Dinner at Fell Park the following evening had been a sober affair. Difficult to sit in the drawing room within sight of the pianoforte and not think wistfully of whispered teasing and furtive touches. Difficult too to banish a sense of desolation as Lady Bedelia had bemoaned her depleted party.

'They were excessively sorry to leave me,' she had sighed, holding court from a chair of red velvet and mahogany newly delivered from London. 'Hannibal, in particular, seemed to feel it most acutely. He said hardly half a dozen words all day.'

*'I am glad that you are back, dear brother,' pronounced Alana with a fond smile.*

*'As am I,' replied Will fervently. 'Oh, Alana. Ten weeks!' And he rolled his eyes. 'Ten long weeks of Lady Bedelia's condescension, Brian's incessant complaining and Mr Franklyn's obsequiousness.' He grimaced. 'As fond as I am of Beverly, I cannot imagine what circumstance would prompt me to return to Kent within a twelvemonth.'*

*'I am sure that Lady Bedelia and her son were sorry to see you go.'*

*At this, a mischievous grin lit Will's features. 'Francis Du Maurier has to be one of the dullest people I have ever encountered. He barely roused himself to bow when we left! I believe that he uttered all of five sentences during our entire visit, at least three of which were 'Yes, Mama."*

*'Not a match for Mr Lecter after all, then.'*

*The grin faded. 'I – no.'*

*'Will?' Reaching out a hand, Alana patted the bed with the other. 'Come sit by me.'*

*Gladly, Will took his sister's proffered hand and sat down beside her. 'I am well, Alana, truly. Yet there is something we should discuss. What of Mr Brown? Should our general acquaintance be informed of his true character?'*

*'Oh.' Alana's start was indication enough of the discomfort which that idea provoked. 'I do not know. Of course, what he did was truly terrible. And to fabricate such a story about Mr Lecter – it is shocking. But the regiment are to leave for Brighton in a fortnight. Mr Brown will soon be gone. Perhaps we should not now expose him so cruelly when he might, for all we know, have repented of his former misdeeds.'*

*Will frowned. 'He might, although I fear you are giving him too much credit. But what of Miss Boyle, whom Mr Brown seeks to marry? The idea of allowing an innocent girl to be duped when we are in a position to prevent it –'*

*Alana faced him, eyes warmly approving. 'Do not worry on her account, dear Will. According to Abigail, Miss Boyle's uncle sent for her a month since, and she is gone to stay with him at Liverpool. She is safe from Mr Brown.'*

*He sighed as relief took hold. 'I am glad of it.'*

*'It is perturbing,' murmured Alana with a shiver. 'There is such an expression of goodness in Mr Brown's countenance. Nothing at all to suggest what lurks beneath.'*

*'While for so long we saw only disagreeableness in Mr Lecter.' Will smiled, a trace of sadness in his voice which he could not hide as he added, 'The truth is that one has all the goodness, and the other all the appearance of it.'*

*'What should we do then?'*

*Will chewed his bottom lip in thought. 'Mr Lecter has not authorised me to make his communication public. Indeed, quite the opposite. I think that we should allow the regiment to leave, and count ourselves lucky that we need never see the charming Mr Brown again.'*

At length, the carriage passed beneath a wide stone archway and continued up a short avenue, lined with elms, which ended in a circular driveway. No sooner had Will, Mrs Crawford and Mr Crawford alighted than the front door opened and a bespectacled butler of perhaps middle age admitted them into the flagstone entrance hall.

'One moment, please.'

As the butler disappeared to fetch the housekeeper, and Mr and Mrs Crawford exclaimed over the size of the fireplace, Will was drawn by the sight of a pair of portraits hanging either side of the staircase at the far end of the hall. A lady and gentleman, finely attired and, judging from the fashions depicted, drawn some twenty years since. His eyes alighted first on the lady and he inhaled sharply, for in that lidded, golden gaze and flaxen hair he saw Hannibal's likeness as clear as day. An inscription beneath the portrait read simply *Simonetta*. Although there was less obvious resemblance to be found in the gentleman, *Lukas*, the nose and the shape of the mouth were achingly familiar. Undoubtedly these were Hannibal's parents.

'We are sure that the family are from home?' he said, casting an anxious glance back towards his aunt and uncle.

Mr Crawford emitted a deep-throated chuckle. 'Yes, Will. Do not worry. You shall not be forced to endure the presence of the *loathsome Mr L* during our visit.'

'Jack,' admonished Mrs Crawford. 'Your sister's choice of address is not something which I care to hear repeated. Particularly when we are standing in the man's own house!'

Will swallowed the indignant retort which had risen to his own lips and cast his aunt a grateful look. Of course, it was hardly his uncle's fault that the family had made erroneous judgements about Hannibal. If anything, it was Will himself who bore most of the responsibility.

*‘The general prejudice against Mr Lecter is so violent, I see little point in attempting to place him in an amiable light, at least for the present.’*

*Alana paused in the act of buttering her toast. ‘I suppose that you are right. Still it is distressing.’*

*Will abandoned his own barely-touched breakfast and stared bleakly out of the window at the rain-drenched lawn. ‘More than you know.’*

*‘Will.’ Alana’s tone was gently reproachful. ‘I wish that you would tell me what troubles you so.’*

*For a moment, the temptation to unburden himself fully to his closest sibling, to share his feelings of frustration and regret – and longing – proved almost unbearable. He turned to his sister, heart full, but the opportunity was lost as Abigail, Fredricka and Mrs Graham appeared.*

*‘I cannot bear it!’ whined Fredricka, flouncing across to the sideboard and snatching up a plate. ‘When they go, I am sure I will die of boredom.’*

*Will watched in bemusement, his own woes momentarily forgotten, as his younger sister helped herself to a veritable mountain of eggs.*

*‘But not, I see, of starvation.’ And, at her glare, ‘Are still you complaining about the regiment leaving, Freddie?’*

*‘Yes, Will,’ she snapped, waving her spoon at him. ‘Because now it is so very much worse.’*

*‘Oh? But what could possibly be worse than being abandoned by the militia?’*

*Narrowly avoiding the swift kick which Alana aimed at his ankle, Will smothered a grin. His mother, naturally, misunderstood.*

*‘Indeed,’ she sighed, sinking onto a chair and reaching for the pot of strawberry preserve. ‘When I was a girl, I cried for two days together when Colonel Fuller’s regiment went away. I thought I should have broke my heart.’*

*Abigail, who up until this point had hovered in the doorway, fairly pranced into the room at this and primly took her seat. ‘I am sure that I would have broke mine if Colonel and Mrs Chilton had not issued their kind invitation.’*

*Fredricka’s mouth pursed in a moue of petulance. ‘They should have asked* me. *Why, Abi is only just sixteen! It was* my *right, not hers!’*

*Will stared at his mother, heart sinking. ‘What invitation?’*

The housekeeper, Mrs Marlow, proved to be an expert guide. They followed her up the short flight of steps and into a stately chamber which boasted galleried walls and a high muralled ceiling depicting various scenes from the life of Julius Caesar.

‘We call this the Painted Hall,’ she told them, quiet pride in every word. ‘The Lecters had it built in the late sixteen hundreds, to celebrate the coronation of King William and Queen Mary.’

‘The family have lived here so long?’ enquired Mrs Crawford.

‘Oh, longer, Ma’am. The Lecters settled here in the mid-fifteen hundreds. The late Mr Lecter’s father caused quite a stir when he moved back to Lithuania for love, leaving the care of the estate to his younger brother. It was only when his uncle died, unmarried and childless, that Lukas Lecter brought his family over and gave up Lithuanian citizenship.’

From the Painted Hall, she led them up a cantilevered staircase through room after room of understated elegance, pointing out features which all spoke of taste and refinement. Such a contrast, thought Will wistfully, with the gaudy extravagance of Fell Park.

*And of this place I might have been master.*

‘Of course, the family’s apartments are private. We are all rather excited,’ confided Mrs Marlow with a twinkling smile, ‘for tomorrow Mr and Miss Lecter are to return, and with a large party of friends. There is quite a bustle going on in the west front, I can tell you!’

‘I can imagine.’

Will hardly knew what he was saying, so perturbed was he by this unexpected news. He ached at the thought of how close he had come to meeting again with Hannibal after so long apart, but at the same time he was flooded with relief. They had hardly parted on good terms; and putting aside the misunderstanding over Mr Brown, Hannibal’s contempt for Will’s family and reservations about his illegitimate status remained insuperable barriers.

*He would have considered our presence here an embarrassment. I regret nothing.*

‘Will, look at this picture.’

They stood in the ground floor dining parlour. It was a large apartment with red walls, dominated by a long banqueting table, over which hung an enormous chandelier set with candles. A serving table set back against the wall was furnished with a selection of fine crystal and silver tableware, while the dining table itself bore an ivory silk runner on which was placed half a dozen squat vases filled with richly-scented roses in various shades of red.

Over the mantelpiece were hung a selection of miniatures, and it was one of these which Mrs Crawford now studied. Will joined her, and stiffened as he found himself face-to-face with a slightly younger version of Mr Brown.

‘Ah, yes. That is the son of the late Mr Lecter’s estate manager,’ pronounced Mrs Marlow, her tone noticeably cooler than at any time in the last couple of hours. ‘He is gone into the army, but I am afraid he has turned out very wild.’

Mrs Crawford glanced at Will, eyebrows raised and a smile at the ready, but Will could not return it.

Mrs Marlow turned dismissively from the portrait to point out another on the adjacent side. ‘That is my master, and very like him.’

Will studied the picture in silence. Like the miniature of Mr Brown, this was a study of a younger man than the one Will knew. Here Hannibal’s face was softer, eyes smiling, no trace of reserve or hauteur. Before death and responsibility and personal betrayal had hardened him.

*I wish I had known you then.*

‘Is it like him, Will?’ enquired Mrs Crawford. ‘It is a handsome face.’

‘Do you know Mr Lecter, sir?’ Mrs Marlow turned to Will in surprise.

Cheeks blooming, Will nodded. ‘A little.’

‘And do not you think him a very handsome gentleman?’

Squirming a little beneath the housekeeper’s beaming appraisal, Will cleared his throat. ‘I – yes. Yes, he is very handsome.’

Mr Crawford, standing at the window with hands clasped behind his back as he surveyed the lower gardens, turned to look at Will with a quizzical expression on his face. Will studiously avoided his gaze.

‘In the gallery, you will see a finer, larger picture of him than this,’ pronounced Mrs Marlow with undisguised pride. ‘Come, I will show you.’

*‘And how did you find my old playmate?’*

*Above the noise and chatter that a dinner at Wolf Manor generally entailed, Will regarded Mr Brown steadily. He would readily have foregone the dubious pleasure of dining once more with the officers, but Abigail and Fredricka’s pleading had been relentless. Still, the contempt that burned bright within him at the knowledge of Mr Brown’s lies and hypocrisy made conversing with the Alpha with any degree of civility a trial.*

*‘I found him... much improved.’*

*‘Indeed! Pray tell me, in what way? In his manners, perhaps? For I cannot think that he is improved in essentials.’*

*A sudden recollection of warm amber eyes, of mingled sighs and tender embraces reawoke in Will a familiar ache. Forcing it down, he focused on Mr Brown’s sneering expression.*

*‘No.’ His eyes hardened. ‘In* essentials *I believe he is very much what he ever was.’*

*Mr Brown’s sudden ruddy glow was evidence enough of the efficacy of Will’s barb. After that, no more words were exchanged between them, and at the end of the evening Will watched the sullen officer’s departure with a fervent wish never again to set eyes on the man.*

*Of some comfort would have been the fact that Mr Brown was soon to depart for Brighton, had not Abigail been bound there as well; and as soon as the door closed on the last guest, Will sought out his father. Instinct drew him to the library, where he found Mr Graham ensconced in his armchair, sipping a hot toddy. He glanced up with an expression of alarm, causing Will to hesitate.*

*‘Am I disturbing you, Father?’*

*But Mr Graham shook his head vigorously and waved his son into the room.*

*‘I thought perhaps that your mother was set on scolding me for abandoning the party. Come in, child, and close the door.’*

*He did so, and with their privacy secured Will wasted no time in getting to the point.*

*‘You must not allow Abi to go to Brighton.’*

*Drink checked halfway to his lips, Mr Graham raised his eyebrows.*

*‘Indeed? And on what grounds am I to forbid this visit on which she and her mother have set their hearts?’*

*Will paced to the window.*

*‘On the grounds that my sister is too headstrong an Alpha to be yet allowed full rein. On the grounds that she thinks of nothing but flirtation and officers.’ And, on a swallow. ‘On the grounds that her influence over Freddie is such that the wildness of their behaviour – and Mama’s approbation of it – calls into question the respectability of our entire family.’*

*Setting down his drink, Mr Graham motioned to an adjacent stool. ‘Come here, my boy.’*

*Will seated himself obediently, though agitation sharpened his voice as he added, ‘Sir, if you were aware of the very great disadvantage which has already arisen from the girls’ unguarded behaviour –’*

*‘Already arisen?’ interrupted Mr Graham with a quizzical smile. ‘What, have they frightened away one of your lovers? Tell me who it is and I will show you a squeamish youth indeed!’*

*Will flushed. ‘Father, please.’*

*Mr Graham patted his hand, eyes gentle. ‘Will, you and Alana are my pride and joy. Saddled with three silly sisters or not, you would always be respected by those who know you.’*

*‘And by those who do not? Gossip travels quickly for a reason, Father. It is the entertainment of the age.’*

*‘Hm, yet thankfully it is also transitory.’ Mr Graham regarded him sagely. ‘Do not you think that I have had my share of it these past twenty years? Yet here I am, and here are we all, ever at the centre of our little community. People are more adaptable than you might believe, Will.’*

*‘Not all people,’ he murmured, throat tightening, eyes downcast.*

*‘Then they are not worth your regret,’ declared Mr Graham stoutly. ‘As for Abigail, you know full well that there will be no peace in this house if she does not go to Brighton. And little enough even then!’*

*Chuckling at his own joke, he took up his drink and sipped with relish.*

*Will recognised with a sinking heart that this was his cue to abandon the subject. His father’s mind was made up. He told himself – though with no true degree of conviction – that he had done his duty by expressing his concerns. All that he could now hope was that Colonel and Mrs Chilton would prove diligent in the care of their headstrong charge.*

It was, the party were all agreed, a fine portrait. At the furthest end of a long gallery, stationed on a low wooden easel, the image of Hannibal waited to be hung alongside all the previous generations of Lecters.

‘It was taken last winter, commissioned by Mr Lecter’s uncle, and is just recently arrived from London.’

The reverence in Mrs Marlow’s voice demanded a respectful examination of the painting, on which all eyes were fixed.

Mrs Crawford admired the elegant cut of Mr Lecter’s black coat. Mr Crawford commented on the nobility of his expression. And Will – Will stood, arrested, before the likeness of the man who, for so brief a time, had been his lover. The effusions of Mrs Marlow, the exclamations of his aunt and uncle – all faded into muffled silence as he contemplated the picture with a heart dangerously full. Sculpted mouth curved into the barest hint of a smile, hooded amber eyes strangely wistful. It was so striking a resemblance of the original that Will swallowed hard, images assailing him in a kaleidoscope of memory. A fresh spring morning, hands and lips exploring; bodies pressed close and flushed; a mutual gentle scenting, voices soft with promise. Then the turn, pain and disillusionment biting hard. Rejection. Mutual evisceration.

*Shall ever I see him again?*

The thought that he might not – that this could indeed be their ending – brought a fresh wave of pain and he turned abruptly from the painting.

*Will handed Abigail into the carriage with a fond smile and a gentle warning. ‘Brighton is a large place, Abi. Take care not to lose yourself. And try not to fall in love more than once a week.’*

*His sister’s peals of laughter, and Mrs Chilton’s accompanying giggles, drowned out Mrs Graham’s relentless sniffles.*

*Colonel Chilton smiled complacently. ‘Do not worry, Mr Graham. I shall be keeping a strict eye on the ladies. Two, in fact.’*

*Bedecked in matching pink muslin, the co-conspirators exchanged mischievous glances. And as the carriage pulled away, Will stepped back reluctantly to join the rest of the family in waving off their youngest, most precocious member.*

*Mrs Marlow escorted them outside via a rear door, and pointed out a red-haired man with a neatly-trimmed beard who was engaged in discussion with two gardeners.*

*‘Mr Sutcliffe, our estate manager,’ she explained, waving to attract his attention. ‘He can advise you on the best route to take around the grounds.’*

*‘You spoke of a canal pond,’ Mr Crawford said with almost boyish eagerness.*

*‘My husband has a fascination with ponds,’ smiled Mrs Crawford, patting his arm fondly.*

*‘Then you will enjoy the gardens very much!’ exclaimed the housekeeper. ‘Ah, Mr Sutcliffe, may we take a few minutes of your time?’*

*‘Did you enjoy Bakewell, Will?’*

*After a day of exploration in the bustling market town, the three travellers were enjoying much-needed rest and hot cups of Negus, courtesy of the ruddy-faced innkeeper.*

*‘Very much.’ Wincing as he removed his boots and stretched his stockinged toes out in front of him, Will added teasingly, ‘Though I did not anticipate how large the North of England is. I believe you will owe me a new pair of boots by the end of our tour.’*

*‘Then brace yourself,’ advised his uncle with a chuckle. ‘Your aunt wishes to visit another of her childhood haunts tomorrow.’*

*‘It was hardly that,’ laughed Mrs Crawford, ‘but as we are so close, I confess I would like very much to see it again. And doubtless you, Will, would be interested in visiting a place of which you have heard so much.’*

*‘Oh?’ Will lowered his feet slowly to the rug, a sinking sensation dispelling his cheerful mood. Surely they could only mean...*

*‘Ravenstag House is one of the foremost country estates in all of England. And its grounds are famed for their beautiful walks.’*

*‘But perhaps the family would not wish to be disturbed,’ said Will, jumping up and busying himself at the table, adding fresh slices of lemon and a sprinkling of cinnamon to his drink – anything to avoid looking at his aunt in that moment. The possibility of meeting Hannibal under such circumstances, after all that had passed between them, was too dreadful to contemplate.*

*‘The family are in London,’ interjected Mr Crawford, blowing on the steam rising from his cup. ‘I overheard the innkeeper and his wife discussing that very subject this morning.’*

*‘Then shall we? What say you, Will?’ Mrs Crawford looked at him expectantly.*

*Will’s lips parted on a silent sigh and he nodded. ‘If you wish it, then of course.’*

*To Ravenstag, therefore, they were to go.*

*Hannibal dismounted and arched his back with a grimace. Two days in the confines of a rattling coach had done little for his mood, and he had felt every jolt as his horse had covered the final eight miles from Matlock. He patted her mane absently, looking down from the woodland track through a thicket of trees. Peeping through the foliage, a glimpse of cream stone brought the hint of a smile to his lips. It had been far too long.*

*The decision to ride on a day ahead of the others afforded him the chance to meet with Mr Sutcliffe and catch up on estate matters before the wearisome business of playing host began, but first he would avail himself of a more pleasurable opportunity.*

*To the left of the track glimmered the still waters of Cascade Pond, so named for its main function of supplying a stepped stone water feature on the upper slopes of the cultivated lawn below. Leading his mare into the shade of a young oak, Hannibal tethered her to a low branch and left her grazing contentedly. He dropped onto the bank and sat for a few moments until the heat of the midday sun spurred him into action. Coat, boots, stockings, neckcloth and waistcoat all came off, abandoned on the warm grass as he stood with a stretch and contemplated what he was about to do. It was at moments like this, he mused, when he could almost convince himself that he could be content - that he could once and for all banish the memory of pine scent and ruffled curls; the feel of the boy in his arms; the taste of him, salty sweet on his tongue.*

*Almost.*

*With a small noise of frustration, Hannibal waded out until the shelf beneath his feet began to fall away. The water was cool but not uncomfortably so, warmed sufficiently by the sun to provide blissful refreshment from the dust of the road. He paused, arced his body and dove into the deepest part.*

*Leaving Mr and Mrs Crawford in the capable hands of Mr Sutcliffe and a gardener, Will eschewed a visit to the canal pond in favour of a little independent exploration. The estate's hunting tower, domed turrets just visible between the trees, had piqued his curiosity upon their arrival, and he set out eagerly up a wide track that curved through woodland in search of the nestled building.*

*He had not been walking long before he heard the sedate clip-clop of horses' hooves coming from the opposite direction. Moments later, there appeared from around the bend a magnificent grey mare, led by the halter. Led by a tall man in a state of partial undress, damp shirt flapping over equally damp breeches. A man with dark blonde hair slicked back from a high forehead, drops of water trickling down aristocratic cheekbones. And those cheekbones were overspread with the deepest blush as the man's eyes met Will's and both drew to an abrupt halt.*

*Will's own cheeks were aflame, and for several agonising moments he scarce remembered how to breathe. Hannibal was here. Hannibal was standing before him. Hannibal. Hannibal.*

*And then he forgot to be embarrassed as his eyes drank in greedily the shape and form of the man whose voice whispered to him in dreams, whose words were carved on his soul.*

*'...without agenda or hope of return. I love you.'*

*He drew in a breath. 'Hello, Mr Lecter.'*

*Hannibal cocked his head slightly. 'Hello, Will.' And he smiled.*

# Growing Closer

The grey jerked her head, whinnying fretfully, and Hannibal turned to her, breaking the spell.

‘Hush, Firefly,’ he crooned. ‘We are almost home.’

Grateful for the diversion, Will stepped up to the horse and laid a trembling hand on her velvety muzzle. His voice, when again he found it, was mortifyingly shaky.

‘She is beautiful. You – did not ride her all the way from London?’

Hannibal tipped back his head on a husky chuckle. Will tried not to notice the gleaming wetness of the column of his throat. Or the shadow of dark hair beneath the shirt which clung, almost translucent, to the firm contours of his chest. An Alpha in the prime of youthful vigour. An Alpha who had possessed him once; who had taken him and filled him so beautifully that ever since, he had felt empty, hollowed-out. As he did now.

*Because it cannot happen again. Because he cannot be yours.*

‘I did not. Two days by coach were tiresome enough. She has been stabled at Matlock this last week.’

‘Oh, of course.’

Silence, and Will felt afresh all the agonising impropriety of his being discovered there. After the dreadful manner of their last parting, his presence at Ravenstag must surely be looked on by its master as indelicate at the least. And compounding his torment was Hannibal’s scent, rising earthy fresh and reminding Will powerfully of the first time – the only time – he had been close enough to give in to the temptation to bury his face against that beautiful throat. *To beg. Take me.*

He fixed his eyes on the mare, stroking her gently, and cleared his throat.

‘Mr Lecter –‘

‘Are we no longer on a first name basis?'

The rough note in Hannibal’s voice brought Will’s eyes flying to his face. Shame and confusion and longing warred within him and he bit his lip, uncertain how to proceed.

‘I did not think that you would wish it. I – I wanted to say that when we applied to see the house, we had no idea of your being in the country. Never would we have presumed –’

‘Please, do not apologise. My arrival today was not planned.’

With a gentle tug at the reins, Hannibal urged the horse forward again, and Will fell into step bedside him.

‘Certainly no one gave any hint of it.’

‘Nor would they have. I have returned a full day early – my housekeeper will not be pleased.’

‘Mrs Marlow did suggest that there was still much to do in preparation for your coming.’

Will permitted himself a brief smile, and felt with a shiver Hannibal’s lingering gaze.

‘Have you been long in Derbyshire?’

He shook his head. ‘We arrived in Bakewell only yesterday.’

‘And where do you stay?’

‘The Rutland Arms. Do you know it?’

Hannibal nodded approvingly. ‘Indeed. You will be well attended. Who accompanies you?’

Heart sinking, Will muttered, ‘My Uncle and Aunt Crawford.’

He glanced sideways, fearful of detecting some sign of distaste for his lowly relations, but Hannibal appeared perfectly tranquil.

‘You should avail yourself of the local walks, if your itinerary allows. If I may take the liberty, I recommend Dovedale – it offers some fine trails.’ And after a pause, ‘I know how fond you are of walking.’

‘I am, yes. Thank you. I shall mention it.’

Still in a daze, mind and heart racing, Will hardly noticed where they were until Hannibal again stopped, at the top of a sloping path which led down to the house. To their right were the stables, arranged in a stone quadrangle with a cobbled courtyard.

‘How is your family?’

Will blinked. ‘My family?’

‘I take it they are still in Hertfordshire. Are they well?’

‘My youngest sister is in Brighton; but yes, they are all well. Thank you.’

‘I am glad.’

Amber eyes were intent on his face, and Will felt with a sharp pang the loss of that warm regard when Hannibal turned to run a gentling hand across the restless mare’s flank.

‘It is too warm for her. I should return her to the stables.’

Will knew that he was staring but he was powerless to stop. Never had he known Hannibal to be so at ease. Never had he been more *surprised* by anyone.

Perhaps Hannibal misinterpreted his silence – and his stare – for the Alpha’s cheeks were once again tinged with pink as he said a trifle gruffly, ‘And I must apologise for the informality of my attire.’

Will’s lips twitched. ‘You mean to say that you do not have a particular objection to wearing clothes?'

The light-hearted response which Hannibal had been about to make died in his throat as the memory of a flushed, tousled, half-dressed Will sprawled across the lawn at Muskrat Hall was replaced quickly by the memory of a flushed, tousled, half-dressed Will sprawled across his lap in the grotto shelter at Fell Park.

‘Now that,’ he murmured, itching suddenly to reach out and pull the boy into his arms, ‘depends entirely on the circumstances.’

And then they were *both* blushing.

There was so much that Hannibal wished to say – to do – but none of it, he reminded himself bleakly, was his right. He had lost all claim on WIll the day that he had lost the Omega's regard.

*'I am not going to miss you. I do not want to know where you are or what you do. I do not want to think about you anymore.'*

The remembered words, uttered then with such determined disconnection, sent a chill through him now. This meeting was surely the last thing that Will wanted. Stepping back, Hannibal forced a smile and bowed.

'If you will excuse me.'

Will's own smile dimmed. 'Of course.'

It was with a heavy heart that Hannibal strode away towards the stable block, fingers clenched around the reins as he led the exhausted mare. He did not allow himself to look back. To have been once again so close – the boy's exquisite fragrance just detectable through all those buttoned-up layers – yet to know that he was forbidden to touch, to hold, to taste... was too cruel. Better to stay out of the way until Will and his party had finished their tour. Better to let him go.

*Again.*

Will stood where Hannibal had left him, watching the broad, retreating back of the master of Ravenstag, and wondered bleakly what he had done to prompt the Alpha's abrupt departure.

*You fool. He is obviously mortified, no matter his polite words. You never should have come!*

Will firmed his lips and set off at a quick pace down the dusty path. All explorations must now be at an end – they could not leave quickly enough. At the bottom of the incline, the path curved around to the West Front, where at length Will spied his aunt and uncle at the far side of a long, narrow pond. They were exclaiming over a fountain which gushed, sparkling, several feet into the air from the antlers of two stone stags, reared on their hindquarters, frozen mid-clash.

'Will, come and look at this! Have ever you seen anything so magnificent?'

He smiled tightly at his aunt, sparing the beautiful sculpture only a cursory glance. 'No, indeed.'

'Mr Sutcliffe tells us that a little further on there is a pinetum and a maze,' she exclaimed. 'A maze, Will! Would not you like to see it?'

An emphatic negative was perched on the tip of Will's tongue, but as he registered both his aunt's enthusiasm and his uncle's smiling indulgence, he had not the heart to express it. He followed them therefore in silence, only half-listening as they pointed out feature after feature, from striking rock formations to natural waterfalls. All were delightful, charming – and completely lost on Will, whose thoughts dwelt repeatedly and anxiously on one subject.

*Where is Hannibal? What is he doing? What must he be thinking?*

The maze was situated in a landscaped clearing below the wooded tree line, enclosed within low walls which, according to Mr Crawford's account from Mr Sutcliffe, had once formed the foundation of a great conservatory. Now, clipped hedges of lush, dark yew rose in a circular formation within a perimeter of red stone.

As they passed a wrought iron bench, Mrs Crawford gave an exclamation of relief and stopped to sit down with a sigh.

‘My apologies, gentlemen; but as you know, I am not a great walker.’

‘Perhaps it is time we left.’ Barely able to hide his eagerness, Will added, ‘I could return to the house and order our carriage.’

‘Nonsense.’ Mrs Crawford clicked her tongue. ‘We are here now. And I would like very much to know what is at the centre of that maze.’ She leaned forward and touched Will’s arm with her gloved hand. ‘You should go in, Will.’

‘Yes, Will,’ prompted Mr Crawford jovially, joining his wife on the bench and removing his hat to fan himself with it. ‘Go in. Best the monster in his lair!’

‘It is a maze, not a labyrinth, Jack!’ But Mrs Crawford was smiling as she scolded.

‘Very well. I shall do my best.’

Admitting defeat, Will turned back towards the maze and trudged inside, allowing it to swallow him whole. A fitting metaphor for his situation, he thought moodily. With little enthusiasm for solving the puzzle, he wandered aimlessly up dead-end after dead-end, lost as much in his ruminations as in the maze itself. He was, therefore, almost startled to find himself finally in the centre, a small space furnished simply with a white bench set beneath a weeping pear tree.

By now the sun was high in a cloudless azure sky, and Will knew that soon his aunt and uncle would wish to return to Bakewell and the inn, for luncheon and a much-desired rest. But the thought of first running the gauntlet of Hannibal’s servants – or, worse, once more encountering Hannibal himself – drew from him a groan of despair. Slumping down onto the bench, he buried his head in his hands.

‘Hello, Will.’

The boy’s shoulders stiffened. With fond regard, Hannibal took a seat beside him, closing his eyes briefly as he caught the sweetness of Will’s scent. Will’s voice, when it came, was muffled.

‘Hello, Hannibal.’

A swell of pleasure followed, but he did not comment on the unexpected capitulation.

‘Where are your aunt and uncle? Are you hiding from them?’

Slowly Will uncoiled, sitting upright to cast him an arch look. ‘They are waiting outside. I am surprised you did not see them.’

‘Ah. Then you came in from the other side. There are two entrances to the maze.’

‘Oh.’ Will’s blue gaze was cautiously searching. ‘I can leave if you would prefer to be alone.’

‘I would not.’

This was, of course, an understatement. Precious time had already been wasted changing clothes – still more in hunting down his estate manager. A fruitless search of the pinetum had left the maze as

the most likely location of his elusive guest, and Hannibal's heart thudded still with relief at having found him. Their eyes connected and he could not repress a tender smile.

'I see that still you are unable to control that mop of yours.'

Dark curls stood in rumpled peaks around a face flushed and, of a sudden, soft. Perhaps Hannibal was not the only one remembering a certain morning in the gardens of Fell Park – gentle touches after exquisite pleasure, when each had sought to prolong their closeness in a show of mutual tidying. *I regret nothing.* Hannibal clasped his hands tightly together and took a deep breath.

'It seems that I, too, lack control. I should have let you go but instead I have sought you out.' He smiled wryly. 'I find that I am too selfish to allow you to disappear.'

'I – do not wish to disappear.' Will's voice was very small, but his eyes met Hannibal's in a flash of defiant blue. 'It was not I who walked away today.'

'Not today, no.'

*'I do not want to think about you anymore.'*

A spike of pain shortened Hannibal's breath. 'You wanted to forget me.'

'I *needed* to.' Will's gaze was unwavering. 'I had it all worked out, you see – what you were, the qualities you lacked. And then,' his throat worked, and hungrily Hannibal tracked the movement, 'you gave me your letter.'

Tension harshened Hannibal's voice. 'No doubt you found its contents – and their owner – to be hateful.'

A tiny sigh, almost inaudible, escaped Will's lips. 'I do not hate you, Hannibal. I have never *hated* you.'

Relieved by this admission, Hannibal could not help but press for more.

'And the letter?'

Will turned fully to face him, all earnestness. 'Your letter shamed me.'

'Will –'

'Although your confession of interference between Miss Verger and my sister *infuriated* me.'

Ah, there was the Will he loved. Ever fascinating in the flitting of his moods; always painfully honest, always passionate. Jaw set mutinously now, flames of blue sparking in narrowed eyes.

And he did love the boy.

*What I would not give that I could call him mine.*

'There is something that you should know,' Hannibal said slowly, wary of an unfavourable reception. 'It is not only my sister who arrives tomorrow. She is accompanied on her travels by the Vergers and the Cordells.'

But other than a brief pursing of lips, Will merely said, ‘I see.’

Rising to his feet, a plan forming in his mind, Hannibal smiled down at the thoughtful Omega.

‘Perhaps, if you are amenable, we could use this opportunity to begin again.’

A cautious yet hopeful light entered Will’s eyes. ‘You would wish to?’

*Ah, Will. How could you doubt it?* But he kept his voice even, his expression impassive.

‘Now that there are no more secrets between us, I believe that we would get along very well. There are few people in this world whom I truly esteem, Will Graham, and you are one of them.’

Will stood up then, radiating amusement – and something else, something so akin to tenderness it threatened to halt Hannibal’s breathing.

‘Hannibal Lecter, are you proposing that we be friends?’

‘It seems that I am.’ *Now is the hardest test. Not allowing fear of rejection to prevent you from acting.* ‘And, as a first step, perhaps you would introduce me to your uncle and aunt.’

The look of surprised pleasure on Will’s face, and the deep blush which accompanied it, was reward enough.

‘Of course, if you wish it.’

‘I do.’ Ignoring the leap of his pulse, Hannibal strode briskly to the exit. ‘Shall we?’

‘Oh,’ grinned Will. ‘After you.’

As Hannibal led the way out of the maze, Will could not prevent himself from staring, albeit covertly. What a change was here! So much of the shield – the person suit – with which Hannibal had fortified himself throughout almost the whole of their acquaintance had, in this one day, slipped enough to reveal a man whom Will yearned to know entirely.

This favourable impression was further cemented when, after the necessary introductions had been made, Hannibal addressed Mr and Mrs Crawford with perfect affability and ease. *Their* surprise was as apparent to Will as his own, although quickly disguised.

‘This is a beautiful estate, Mr Lecter. Perfectly charming.’

‘Thank you, Mrs Crawford,’ replied Hannibal, eyes warm. ‘I confess that I am very proud of my home. But I hope that seeing it has not tired you too much.’

‘Not at all,’ she smiled.

‘We were just discussing your pinetum.’ Mr Crawford spoke with eager relish. ‘I have heard that it is one of the finest in the country.’

Hands clasped behind his back, Hannibal looked touchingly pleased by the compliment.

‘My father would have been thrilled to hear you say so. Perhaps you would allow me to show it to you? It is just the other side of the maze.’

The Crawfords gladly assented, and without further ado they all set off together. At first, Hannibal led the way with Mr Crawford, Will following close behind with his aunt, but at length Mrs Crawford declared a preference for her husband's arm. Thus Will found himself taking the vacant space at Hannibal's side. He could feel his aunt's gaze on him, gently assessing, and took care to maintain a respectable distance from their host. Yet he could not stop turning the same questions over and over in his mind.

*Why is he so altered? Can all of this be for me? What can it mean?*

'How long do you stay in Bakewell?'

Jolted out of his reverie, Will looked at Hannibal and quickly away again. It seemed impossible to meet the Alpha's gaze without blushing, a mortifying situation which, for the present, he was unable to control. He cleared his throat.

'Two weeks. My uncle's business prevents him from taking too long a vacation.'

'Then perhaps you would allow –'

Hannibal hesitated and Will risked another sidelong glance. Their eyes met and held.

'I would like very much to introduce my sister to you during your stay.'

'I would like very much to meet her.' Despite his best intentions, his voice trembled slightly.

'Ah, see that tree? It was the first in the pinetum, planted by my great-grandfather.'

Hannibal stopped slightly behind him, body angled as he pointed to a sweeping, majestic conifer in the middle of a clearing. All eyes swung immediately to the left, and Will was taken completely by surprise when he felt Hannibal grasp his hand and squeeze it gently.

'I have missed you, Will.' HIs voice was low and urgent.

*And I, you.*

Despite all his intentions to the contrary, Will had to acknowledge that he had been fighting a lost cause even when there had been no expectation of seeing Hannibal again. And now...

Looking down at their joined hands, he was gripped by a longing so intense, he almost whimpered aloud. Briefly he returned the pressure, before tugging his hand free and rejoining his aunt and uncle. He and Hannibal were to be friends now, no more. It would not do to create the wrong impression.

As they wandered the pinetum, there was much to see and exclaim over, and no more opportunity for furtive touching. Whether Will was more relieved by this or disappointed, he could not decide. Nor were Hannibal's feelings any easier to decipher. His face retained its usual expression of slightly stern passivity, though in his exchanges with Mr and Mrs Crawford he was undoubtedly more animated than Will had ever seen him.

Not until the party had reached the carriage, which was waiting to deliver them back to Bakewell, did Hannibal speak again directly to Will. After handing Mrs Crawford in and bowing to Mr Crawford as he too ascended the steps, Hannibal, to Will's perturbation, thrust out his hand. The

idea that he could be initiating a handshake between them – an intimate gesture acceptable only between social equals – was beyond astonishing.

'Well?'

Lips twitching upwards, Hannibal looked pointedly at the arm which still hung loosely at Will's side.

Gathering his wits as best he could, Will hastily proffered his own hand and found it clasped tightly.

Eyes honey-warm with approval, Hannibal spoke in a soft murmur, head inclined towards his. 'It would seem that fate and circumstance have brought us back together, Will. And I, for one, am very glad of it.'

'As am I.' He almost blurted the words in his eagerness. To show Hannibal that he did not resent the past. To convey his appreciation for the welcome they had received. And for other, more complicated reasons that he did not wish to dwell on. 'Very glad.'

They stood like that for a few moments more, bodies close, eyes locked. A discreet cough from the interior of the carriage, however, reminded Will of his determination not to rouse Mrs Crawford's match-making instincts, and reluctantly he withdrew his hand, suppressing a shiver as Hannibal's fingertips trailed, lingering, across his palm.

A final exchange of smiles and Will climbed into the carriage. He attempted valiantly to ignore his aunt's triumphant look and turned instead to look out of the carriage window as they drove off. Hannibal appeared deep in thought, hands clasped behind his back and head bent. He did not look back at the carriage, but walked slowly towards the house. Still, there was nothing in Will's heart but lightness for the rest of the day.

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The chimes of All Saints' Church heralded noon as Hannibal drove the curricle over the humped bridge, gateway to the small market town of Bakewell, and proceeded to navigate with care its narrow, bustling roads. Beside him, his sister adjusted her skirts for what seemed the tenth time, and Hannibal frowned.

'Mischa, do not fidget. There is no reason for nervousness.'

'Leave her, Hannibal. Mischa will do very well – it is *you* who appear nervous.'

Margot leaned forward in her seat and aimed at him a teasing look, which he ignored in favour of reaching to briefly touch his sister's hand.

'My apologies. Of course you will do splendidly.'

Mischa. Dear, sweet Mischa. Still a little fragile physically – although designed to seat only two, the curricle easily accommodated all three of them – but strong enough now to leave behind the distractions of London and resume the life and role she had been born to.

With wide, golden eyes she looked up at him now, releasing the material which she had gathered between restless fingers on the short journey from Ravenstag, and smoothed out the fine muslin

with a murmur of thanks.

Drawing up outside the inn, Hannibal jumped from the curricle and handed it over to the charge of an ostler before helping down first Mischa and then Margot. But before they could proceed into the inn, Hannibal found himself stayed by Margot's hand.

'You and Mischa should go in first.' She cast an uncertain look upwards at the lead-paned windows. 'I think it best if you smooth the way. The family might not be eager to see me.' She sighed. 'We did, after all, leave Hertfordshire rather suddenly.'

'Nonsense,' clipped Hannibal, guilt rising at the reminder of all that he had yet to confess to his dearest friend. 'That is all in the past. Besides, Mr Graham would never cut you. He has not a drop of pettiness within him.'

'Indeed! You *have* changed your tune.'

But there was no malice in her tone, only gentle amusement tinged with curiosity.

Once inside, they were shown upstairs to a small but comfortably-appointed visitors' room, wherein Margot was furnished with a pot of tea. Hannibal gestured for Mischa to go before him, and they were led down a narrow corridor to a solid oak door. A knock, a brief enquiry, and they entered to find within faces betraying varying degrees of surprise, though all unquestionably welcoming.

It was the youngest member, bright blue eyes smiling and cheeks becomingly rosy, to whom Hannibal's attention was immediately drawn, though he remembered his manners long enough to first greet the Crawfords.

'It gives me great pleasure to see all of you again, and to have the opportunity to introduce my sister to you. Mischa,' drawing her forward with a gentle hand, 'this is Mr and Mrs Crawford, and their nephew, Mr Will Graham.'

Mrs Crawford inclined her head graciously, the gentlemen bowed and Mischa managed a low curtsey with barely a tremble.

'Good afternoon, Miss Lecter. I hope that you are not too fatigued after your journey.'

Will stepped forward, all gentleness, and Hannibal experienced a deep swell of gratitude as he saw how his sister responded immediately to Will's projected calm.

'Not at all. Thank you.'

'It is good to finally meet you. Your brother speaks very highly of you.'

Hannibal watched, fascinated, as Will's words and soft tone seemed to draw Mischa to him, her shoulders relaxing, head lifted higher. Soon they were talking and laughing as if old friends. Heartened, Hannibal joined the Crawfords and engaged them in conversation about their plans for the day, every so often shooting curious glances at the two young people by the window. Never had he known his shy little sister to warm to a stranger so readily. Was it their Omegan connection? But as much as he wished to allow them to talk uninterrupted, Margot was still waiting.

'Mr Graham.'

Privately, Hannibal delighted in the fresh spread of colour across the boy's cheeks as he turned at the sound of his name and their eyes met.

'Mischa and I did not come alone. Miss Verger is also here and she is most desirous of seeing you. Should I fetch her?'

'Of course! I would like very much to see Miss Verger again.'

Detecting nothing but pleasure in Will's tone, Hannibal had no hesitation in leaving Mischa while he returned to the visitors' room, where a patient Margot was just finishing her second cup. And when once again face to face, Will and Margot greeted each other with genuine warmth.

'It has been too long since last we were all together – above eight months,' sighed Margot. 'I trust that *everyone* at home is well.'

'They are, thank you.'

If there was perhaps more that either party wished to say, both were far too polite to do so in company. Seizing the opportunity that the momentary silence afforded, Hannibal stepped forward to address the Crawfords and Will.

'My sister and I would be delighted if you would join us for dinner at Ravenstag tonight – if, that is, you have no previous engagement.'

Uncertainty flashed across Will's features, and although it pained Hannibal to see it, he could well understand the cause. Not for the first time, he wished that he had not invited Mason and the Cordells to spend the summer at the estate. Courtesy may have demanded it – and he could not have foreseen *this* – but the prospect of Will being subjected to more of their supercilious sneering was distinctly unpalatable.

'That is very kind of you both, Mr Lecter.' Mr Crawford looked expectantly at his wife and then at Will. 'We had planned only to dine here at the inn. I am sure that I speak for all of us when I say that we would be pleased to accept.'

Hannibal half-expected Will to protest. To his relief, however, the boy firmed his lips and nodded.

'It will be our pleasure.'

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Pleasure was, perhaps, overstating it. Particularly as Mr Verger's greeting consisted of a half-raised glass and a lip curl that did not pretend to much in the way of friendliness. Seated beside him on the blood red Chesterfield was his sister, Mrs Cordell, who managed at least a brief nod. Mr Cordell was already asleep, slumped in a corner armchair, an empty glass clutched to his oversized stomach.

Mr and Mrs Crawford, who had always shared Will's enjoyment of the absurd, thankfully took not the least bit of umbrage. And other than a private exchange of amused looks, they sat down with perfect equanimity.

Hannibal was another matter entirely. He looked, Will considered, like a man ready to upend every stick of furniture and turn out the surly trio upon a word. Standing close together as they happened

to be, it felt natural to surreptitiously brush his thumb across the centre of Hannibal's palm in a gesture of reassurance. Natural, but perhaps ill-advised. For Hannibal turned to him with a look of thunderstruck surprise which caused Will to blush and hastily withdraw his hand. How glad he was when, a moment later, a distraction presented itself in the familiar shape of a large black dog. Ripper came bounding into the saloon and hurtled straight towards him, followed closely by Miss Lecter, who looked more animated than Will had yet seen her, in her laughing pursuit of the animal.

Mrs Cordell tutted, Mr Verger eyed the dog with unconcealed dislike; and Will, to hide his grin, knelt to greet the enthusiastic arrival.

'Mischa, what are you doing?' Hannibal's tone was gently reproving but his eyes crinkled with amusement. 'You know very well that Ripper should be confined to the stables when we are receiving guests.'

'You may blame me.'

Miss Verger, looking less than contrite, entered the library with barely a glance at her scowling siblings. She placed a gentle hand on the dog's head.

'He has been confined in a carriage for the better part of three days, Hannibal. He needs exercise.'

'Is that not what grounds are for? I believe there is a sufficiency here,' huffed Mr Verger.

'Really, Mason? Are you volunteering to take him?'

The look of incredulous horror on Mr Verger's face was too much for Will, and he could not suppress a snort of laughter. Immediately, he found himself the glaring focus of the Alpha's wrath.

'Pray, Mr Graham,' he drawled, 'are not the militia removed from Hertfordshire? They must be a great loss to *your* family.'

Mortification turned instantly to indignation; and Will started to his feet, fully intending to challenge such blatant rudeness whether or not it was his place to do so. Hannibal also took a step forward, eyes steely and countenance grim. But a small sound of distress alerted Will to the fact that Miss Lecter was by no means unaffected by the oblique reference to Mr Brown.

Anxious to avoid a scene which would inevitably cause a good deal of embarrassment all around, Will grasped Ripper by the collar and said, with a lightness he was far from feeling, 'It is true that the presence of a militia is most reassuring in a neighbourhood. But a good dog is just as valuable a guardian, would not you say, Miss Lecter?'

'Oh, yes. In-indeed.'

Grateful liquid golden eyes met his and he smiled gently.

'Then might you direct me to the stables? I would be happy to return Ripper to his stall. And perhaps we could take him for a turn in the grounds beforehand. With your permission, of course, Mr Lecter.'

At last he forced himself to meet Hannibal's eyes, and the approval he found therein coiled warm in his belly.

'Granted gladly, Mr Graham.'

Watching Will and Mischa depart, Ripper padding at their heels, Hannibal wished with all his heart that he could abandon his duties as host and follow them. Without Will's vibrant presence, the room was somehow colder, colours dulled and lights dimmed. Yet not for the world would Hannibal leave the Crawfords to the tender mercies of Mason and the Cordells.

Still, when Will returned, pink-cheeked and tousle-haired, it was difficult to maintain even the appearance of an interest in anything else. Several times during dinner, as Mr Crawford led a lively discussion on Izaac Walton and the merits of being a Compleat Angler, Hannibal's attention was snared by the vivacious boy seated beside Mischa at the opposite end of the table. Will's low, musical voice, his graceful gestures and animated expression, held for him a charm that put Hannibal in danger of losing the thread of his companions' conversation entirely.

*And still I can feel the gentleness of your touch.*

This put him in mind of an earlier conversation with his sister and Margot.

'Mischa,' he prompted, when at length a suitable pause presented itself, 'have you asked Mr Graham?'

Will looked over at him, brows raised.

'Not yet,' replied Mischa, smiling, golden ringlets brushing her cheeks as she tilted her head. 'Perhaps *you* would like to.'

'How very intriguing,' drawled Mason, cutting into his fillet of pork with unnecessary vigour. 'Pray do enlighten us!'

All eyes swung to Hannibal, but he was interested only in *one* pair of quizzical blue. And it was Will whom he now addressed.

'It has been my family's custom for many years to give a ball to mark the end of the London Season.'

'And it is tomorrow night,' interjected Mischa excitedly, 'and you are – all of you, that is – invited!'

'Well!' Mr Crawford beamed at Mischa – who was blushing a little after her stumbling invitation – and then lifted his glass to Hannibal in salute. 'That is immensely kind of you both.'

'Indeed it is, Uncle.'

Hannibal's eyes flicked immediately back to Will. A soft, almost shy smile played about his lips. Lips that Hannibal had tasted and plundered and had thought never to do so again. But perhaps...

'There it is, then.' Mrs Crawford's light tones brought him back to the present and his sadly neglected duties as host. 'We would be happy to attend, Mr Lecter.'

Mason huffed; Margot grinned; the Cordells wore identical expressions of pained sufferance. And Hannibal cared not a whit.

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Their guests did not linger long after dinner.

‘You must have much still to do, and we would not for the world impede you.’

Smiling warmly at Mrs Crawford, Hannibal shook his head. ‘You could not possibly do so, but I greatly appreciate your thoughtfulness.’

With Mr and Mrs Crawford stowed safely within the carriage, he turned to Will. This leave-taking was harder; and, aware of his sister’s presence, Hannibal attempted to check the ardency of his gaze as Will thrust out his hand, lips tilted in a mischievous grin.

‘Thank you for a most entertaining evening.’

Without hesitation, Hannibal returned the offered handshake – although it was, in the event, more a lingering press of palms.

‘Thank *you*.’

He endeavoured to say with his eyes what he could not speak aloud. *For Mischa. For Ripper. For enduring with grace my insufferable acquaintances. Thank you.*

The look that Will gave him in return warmed him to his toes.

‘You are very fond of him, are not you?’ Slender arm threaded through his, Mischa leaned against him as they stood at the front door and watched the carriage depart. And when Hannibal gave no reply, ‘You are, I can tell.’

‘Oh yes? And how is that, little one?’ His eyes were still glued to the retreating, rattling vehicle.

‘Well, you *watch* him a great deal, but you do not *say* much to him. Almost as if you do not know how. And when other people speak to *you*, it seems as if you hardly hear them.’

He felt his sister’s small frame shake suddenly with laughter, and looked down at her with haughty enquiry.

‘I am sorry,’ she gasped, ‘but seeing you – *you* – so inattentive is quite wonderful.’ And she added mischievously, ‘Inattentive to most of us, that is.’

On the point of snapping a denial, it occurred to Hannibal that this was the happiest he had seen his sister in months. Pale cheeks blossoming peach, eyes brimful of mirth.

*And all because of Will Graham.*

‘You are incorrigible,’ he replied eventually, heart squeezing with relief at the realisation that she was, finally, herself again and whole.

‘Do not worry.’ Mischa patted his arm, wholly unaware of the serious direction which his thoughts had taken. ‘I promise to behave myself tomorrow evening.’

*Tomorrow evening.* When there would be music. And dancing. *And Will...*

Hannibal found himself suddenly eager and alert, tiredness slipping from him, nerves thrumming with anticipation. Tomorrow evening could not come quickly enough.

# Falling Deeper

Chapter Notes

Warning: here the fic really starts to earn its rating!

Steered in front of the looking-glass, Will stared uncomfortably at his grainy reflection.

‘It is so – bright.’

‘Precisely,’ commented Mrs Crawford with satisfaction, smoothing down the rich material hugging Will’s slender shoulders.

‘I feel ridiculous.’

But Mrs Crawford was not to be put off as she fussed around him, straightening a cuff here and a hem there. ‘Nonsense. You are a vibrant young man and you should dress as such. There will be time enough for starched sobriety.’

‘Give up the fight, Will,’ advised Mr Crawford, checking his watch before slipping it back into the silk pocket of his waistcoat and pulling on his gloves. ‘You know your aunt when she has a mind to do something. She will not be dissuaded.’

‘And what is it exactly that you are trying to do?’

Suspicious, Will twisted to face her, only to be set firmly back in place. Elegant in shimmering grey silk, Mrs Crawford shot him a withering look through the glass.

‘Will Graham, I declare I have never heard such a fuss over a simple red coat!’

‘And gold waistcoat,’ he countered, scowling at himself once more.

‘And such a perfect fit! You see, my dear?’ Turning to Mr Crawford. ‘It is perfectly possible to find a decent tailor outside Savile Row.’

‘So it seems,’ he replied, adding dryly. ‘And perhaps, if we leave within the next five minutes, we may arrive at Ravenstag while there are still guests enough to appreciate it.’

‘Oh, tush. We have plenty of time. Now, Will,’ as she stepped back to survey him. ‘Fetch your gloves and we shall go.’

It was with mixed feelings that Will scooped his gloves from the windowsill. A warm evening breeze drifted through the open casement, stirring the arrangement of scarlet roses sitting in a squat vase on the sill. A few fat petals fell and Will picked one up, rubbing it absently between finger and thumb. Within the hour, they would be back at Ravenstag. Within the hour, he would see Hannibal again.

‘Will?’

‘Yes.’ He pressed the petal to his lips in an almost-kiss before dropping it and donning his gloves. ‘I am ready.’

***

‘How very ill Mr Graham looked yesterday,’ sneered Mason from his sprawl across the Chesterfield, glass dangling precariously from outstretched fingers. ‘I never in my life saw anyone so much altered as he is since the winter.’

‘Never,’ echoed Mrs Cordell, seated primly on the sofa opposite. ‘Why, he was as ruddy as a field hand!’

Recalling the glowing beauty of Will’s complexion, Hannibal opened his mouth to issue a sharp retort, but Margot pre-empted him.

‘Strange,’ she laughed. ‘I was just thinking how well he looked. So full of health and vigour.’ Hiding a smile behind her ivory fan, a perfect match for the colour of her silk gown, she added, ‘Whereas you, my dear sister, and you, brother, have grown quite wan and pale. A little outdoor exercise would do neither of you any harm.’

‘For my own part,’ continued Mason, a glower the only response to his sister’s challenge, ‘I require more of refinement and symmetry in a person’s features if I am to regard them as at all handsome.’ And he cast a sly look at Hannibal. ‘I am sure that you agree, Hannibal. After all, it was you, was not it, who declared once that Will Graham ‘has hardly a good feature in his face’?’

Anger spiked hot and stinging, directed as much against himself as Mason, and for a moment Hannibal did not trust himself to speak. He managed, however, to reply with cold civility, ‘It was. How I could have been so obtuse is beyond me. However, that was only when I first knew him, for it is many months since I have considered him as one of the handsomest people of my acquaintance.’

In the periphery of his vision, Mischa grinned. Margot cast him a look of surprised delight, while a flustered Mrs Cordell nudged her husband into wakefulness. Mason, mouth opening and closing like a floundering fish, was positively florid, and seemed on the brink of retaliating when, propitiously, Stammets appeared in the doorway.

‘The first guests are arriving, sir.’

***

Handing off their outer garments in the entrance hall, Will and the Crawfords were directed by a liveried servant into the main part of the house, wherein the cream of high society mingled; acquaintances nodding graciously as they passed one another, friends exchanging delighted greetings, strangers waiting to be introduced by the Master of Ceremonies.

Against the stately backdrop of the Painted Hall, its occupants presented a beautiful palette: pastel shades broken by the occasional splash of bold colour; the finest silks, satins, velvets and lace. Who was Alpha and who Omega was almost impossible to tell, most natural scents having been masked by rich perfumery which clung sticky to the air.

Guests drifted up and down a connecting corridor, and thence also went Will and the Crawfords. At its end, they found themselves in a large ballroom glittering with candelabra, tiny flames catching and reflecting the spangled lights of an enormous crystal chandelier. On a low platform at the far end, musicians played a stately refrain for the long row of dancers progressing down the centre.

Mr Crawford’s eyes brightened at the sight of a sideboard groaning with full-to-the-brim cups of punch. ‘Well, my dear, shall we partake of some refreshment before we join the throng?’

‘Gladly.’ Mrs Crawford turned to Will. ‘But I would not wish to leave you alone, Will. Do you see anyone you know?’

‘Not yet.’ Will touched her hand reassuringly. ‘But I can shift for myself, Aunt.’

‘That will not be necessary.’ A delightful Omegan scent of meadow grass and wildflowers, undiluted by artifice, heralded Miss Lecter’s appearance at Will’s side. A vision of delicate loveliness, she smiled shyly. ‘It is good to see you again.’

‘And you, Miss Lecter.’ Will grinned. ‘Tell me, is Ripper secured safely for the night or might we expect an upset at any moment?’

‘Never fear.’ She giggled. ‘Hannibal insisted on locking him away himself. I am sure he anticipates a great escape at some point in the evening. He has already checked on him thrice!’

‘Mischa, my dear!’

A tall, lean, sharp-eyed gentleman with silver-streaked blonde hair strode through the throng towards them, arms outstretched. And with a cry of delight, Miss Lecter ran into his embrace.

‘Uncle Robert! When did you arrive?’

‘This very instant.’ Holding her away from him, the older man beamed, eyes creasing attractively at the outer corners. ‘How wonderful it is to see you looking so well. Now tell me, where is that nephew of mine?’

‘Ah, here you are at last. Your timekeeping, as always, leaves much to be desired, Uncle.’

Will looked past the embracing couple and forgot for a moment how to breathe.

*Hannibal.*

He struck a dashing figure in a black, velvet-trimmed coat, grey silk paisley-patterned waistcoat accentuating his powerful musculature. He was handsome, vital... and the look in his eyes as he stared back at Will sent a pleasurable tremor through him.

‘Yes, yes. But how are you, my boy?’

Hannibal came forward then, and Will was granted a momentary reprieve from his fluttering feelings as his host’s attention flicked back to his uncle and sister.

‘Looking forward to hearing of your latest travels, Uncle. Where was it this time? Lake Garda?’

‘Yes, and next week I leave for Paris. You know how I cannot bear to be idle.’

‘I do.’

The two exchanged warm smiles before Hannibal turned apologetically to their small audience.

‘But I am being remiss. Uncle, allow me to introduce Mr and Mrs Crawford and their nephew, Mr Graham. My uncle, Mr Robert Lecter.’

As the usual courtesies were observed, and easy conversation struck up, Will found his gaze drifting back continually to Hannibal. Each time, those hooded eyes caught his own. And each time, they lingered longer.

The dance ended, and Will found that his heart was hammering in anticipation of an invitation to partner in the next. Anticipation grew to certainty as Mr and Mrs Crawford took their places in the set, and a smart young officer stepped up to request the pleasure of Miss Lecter's company.

But as Will prepared to be surprised, Hannibal hailed an elderly gentleman who was walking by, and launched immediately into lengthy introductions between the two older men.

Disappointment stabbed, and instantly Will chastised himself for such a selfish reaction. Hannibal was, after all, the host of this gathering.

*Besides, what right have you to feel slighted? You are friends now, nothing more.*

His glance alighted on Miss Verger, who stood by the doorway conversing with a young, dark-haired woman. She looked up and smiled, and with a murmured excuse Will bowed to the company and walked across to join them.

'Mr Graham, how fine you look,' exclaimed Miss Lecter upon his approach. 'This is my good friend, Miss Elizabeth LeBeau. I have been telling her of the time we spent in Hertfordshire last winter.'

There it was again, the wistfulness of tone that spoke of feelings far from forgotten.

'I look forward to the day we are all together once more,' was Will's gentle response.

And a sigh broke from Miss Verger's lips. 'As do I.'

A tug of awareness drew Will's gaze back to the group he had left. Hannibal was watching him, expression enigmatic. Cheeks heating, and desperately in need of distraction, Will turned to Miss Verger's friend.

'Miss LeBeau, would you care to dance the next with me?'

Hannibal had always found the duties of host to be exceedingly tiresome. So many guests to greet, to introduce, to entertain. Refreshments to circulate and entertainments to co-ordinate.

But the moment he had laid eyes on Will, haloed by candlelight, flushed and beautiful, an exotic bird in scarlet and gold plumage...

All else had been forgotten, an inconsequential blur of noise and motion. Beloved relations were suddenly hindrances, when all Hannibal had wished to do was lead Will onto the floor so that he might touch and listen and gaze his fill. How fortuitous that an old acquaintance of his father's had happened to pass their way, a convenient distraction for his uncle that would leave Hannibal free to solicit Will's hand – only for the Omega to walk away and solicit the hand of *another*.

*Maddening boy.*

His head told him that Miss LeBeau was Betan and therefore no rival for Will's affections. Omegas bonded only with Alphas. But his heart apparently had ideas of its own. As Haydn segued into Mozart and the lively strains of his Piano Sonata No.5 in G major, Hannibal observed in brooding silence the commencement of the dance. And soon he found himself circling the room with restless steps. Watching. Cataloguing. Will's gloved hands enfolding his partner's; Will's eyes flashing enjoyment; Will's lips curved in a youthful grin.

*Will. Will. Will.*

Jealousy swelled potent in his chest. And something else. *Possessiveness.* Aching and primal. It appalled him and yet he was powerless against its elemental savagery. Powerless against his endless pull towards this fascinating, beautiful boy.

*My beautiful boy. Mine.*

'I beg your pardon, Miss LeBeau? I did not quite –'

But it was a lost cause. Even as the amiable lady repeated her comment, Will was oblivious to its sense. Hannibal's presence – his slow, stalking prowl around the perimeter of the room – had pervaded his consciousness and rendered all else insignificant. He found himself darting coquettish glances at Hannibal between turns, skin warm and humming, senses attuned to the impossibly handsome Alpha. And the more exasperated grew Hannibal's expression, the more teasing were Will's looks. Until, inevitably, the dance drew to a close and Hannibal's thunderous face told of a reckoning to come.

Light-headed with anticipation, Will escorted his bewildered partner back to Miss Verger, who was now part of a large group all enjoying frothing cups of punch. Among them were a merry Mr Crawford and a rather quiet Mrs Crawford. Will touched her arm.

'Aunt, are you unwell?'

She pressed a hand to her forehead and smiled weakly. 'I confess, I have felt better. But it is only a headache.'

Immediately, Mr Crawford was all contrition. 'My dear, you should have told me.'

'Really, it is nothing.'

But the hesitancy in her voice told a different story. Will exchanged looks of concern with Mr Crawford.

'Perhaps we should return to the inn.'

'No, Will,' Mrs Crawford protested at once. 'I would not dream of curtailing *your* evening.' She turned to her husband, 'My dear, I wonder if perhaps Will…'

'Ah, yes. Perhaps Will could remain.' Mr Crawford frowned. 'But how is *he* to return to the inn if we have taken the carriage?'

At this, Miss Lecter, who was standing close by, turned and addressed them, with only a hint of awkward shyness.

'Pardon me, but Mr Graham would be very welcome to stay here tonight. We always have extra rooms prepared on occasions such as this.'

Will regarded her with gratitude, and after that there was no more hesitation. The butler was summoned to order the carriage, and Miss Lecter insisted on accompanying the Crawfords out.

Despite feeling a certain amount of anxiety for his aunt, the sight of a determined – and in all probability seething – Alpha, making his way towards them through a sea of eager acquaintances

reminded Will that he should probably move on. Alas, it was not to be, as another of Miss Lecter's group lurched into his path and addressed him with an unpleasantly familiar leer.

'Mr Graham. Are you enjoying yourself?'

Cheeks mottled red, speech slurred, it was clear that the cup which Mr Verger was slopping around was not by any means his first of the evening.

Swallowing his dislike, Will bowed stiffly. 'I am, thank you.'

'Yes.' The leer transformed into a smirk. 'Doubtless you – and, I daresay, your uncle and aunt – are unused to such grandeur. Ravenstag must seem quite another world.' He stepped closer, and the sickliness of his scent mixed with an overpowering cologne drew from Will an involuntary grimace. 'But try not to make yourself uncomfortable, eh? You will be back in your own sphere soon enough.'

'Oh, Mason. That was... almost polite.'

The sighed words, uttered in a voice as smooth and deadly as a blade, caused the fine hairs on Will's nape to rise. Hannibal stepped forward to stand beside him, so close that their shoulders almost touched. So close that his scent wrapped around Will, banishing in an instant the rancid perfume that had hung over him like a pall.

'Well, of course, I meant only to –'

'I think it would behove you to retire early.'

Hannibal's clipped tones cut through Mr Verger's stumbling attempt to redeem himself, brooking no opposition. The rest of the group had fallen silent, and Miss Verger stepped forward to take her brother's arm, soft green eyes conveying a silent apology to Will.

'What a good idea. To tell the truth, I myself am quite fatigued. Would you escort me to my room, brother dear?'

Mr Verger ground his teeth, glared at the company in general, and finally offered his arm to his sister with a hissed, 'Of course, Margot, *dear*.'

Despite his feeling of sympathy for Miss Verger, Will could not help but rejoice at the removal of her poisonous sibling. And as soon as they were gone, he turned to Hannibal with words of thanks on his lips.

'I – oh.'

The thundercloud was back, and despite himself, Will felt a grin tugging at his lips.

'Am *I* to be chastised now?'

'Are you – ?' Hannibal's rumble of vexation was lost as the musicians struck up an exuberant air.

But it was not to be a permanent reprieve. For, a moment later, Will's hand was seized, and he was pulled without ceremony through the increasingly noisy throng and out into the corridor. To somewhere quiet, he assumed with amusement, where Hannibal could continue to berate him uninterrupted. But as they crossed the threshold of the Painted Hall, Hannibal slipped into the

shadowed privacy of the space beneath the cantilevered staircase. And Will was yanked in after him.

The next moment, Will found himself trapped between cold stone and a warm body, hands pinned above his head. A fiery gaze tracked the movement of his throat as he swallowed.

‘What a teasing boy you are,’ growled Hannibal. ‘Is this what you wanted? Hm?’

Will could only stare back at him, heart thumping, mouth dry. ‘Yes.’

‘Why, Will? Tell me. Why have you spent the last hour taunting me so?’ Pressing closer still and closer.

But Will could think only of the hard body against his and the gloved thumb stroking across the fine skin of his imprisoned wrists.

‘You are so different here,’ he breathed, intoxicated by the Alpha’s rich, warm scent. ‘*Why* are you so different?’

‘I am as I have always been.’

Hannibal lowered his head until their mouths were just touching. And slowly, oh so slowly, he brushed their lips together. When he pulled back, the desire flaming in his eyes drew from Will a moan.

‘But now you see me. And I see you. I see *all* of you, Will.’

Still, Will’s chin tilted in stubborn challenge. ‘Yet last night you spoke scarcely a word to me.’

‘And so tonight you sought to provoke me?’

‘I sought –’ He licked his lips, tasting Hannibal, and met his gaze with helpless longing. ‘I sought *you*, in whatever way I could have you.’

At this, Hannibal released him, and with the utmost gentleness passed seeking fingers across Will’s brow, tracing the contours of his face.

‘Perhaps in public I wear too effective a disguise. But here, now, with you, I wish for all pretence to be dropped.’

*Here, now, with you...*

Aching, wanting, yet all too aware of the obstacles that stood between them, Will hesitated.

‘Hannibal, we agreed to be friends – to begin again.’

‘Yes, we are friends. Yes, we have begun anew.’

Hannibal trailed his fingers downwards, skimming lightly over skin and fine cloth, and Will arched into his touch.

‘But am I to pretend that I do not know how it feels to be close to you? To press slowly within you? To *lose* myself in you?’

A tiny whine escaped Will's lips, and his resolve weakened with the darkening of Hannibal's eyes and touches that lingered ever longer.

'Say my name,' murmured Hannibal, once again dipping his head, tongue tracing a path across Will's lower lip. 'I want to hear you say it again.'

Rendered reckless by desire, craving to taste again the man - the Alpha - pressed hip to hip against him, Will whimpered, 'Hannibal.'

And he closed his eyes in pleasure as Hannibal kissed across his cheek, turning his head aside to nuzzle the curls at his temple.

'And should we be friends and nothing more?' Feathering kisses against his forehead, Hannibal prompted gently, 'Is that truly what you wish, Will?'

'I do not – I do not –'

Coherent thought now almost impossible, Will choked out the words; but when Hannibal started immediately to withdraw, Will curled his fingers into the soft cloth of Hannibal's coat and held on with stubborn tightness.

'I do *not* wish that.'

He felt Hannibal's smile. Heard the tenderness of it in words whispered against his skin. 'Then tell me what you *do* wish.'

'No.' Eyes still closed, Will tilted his head to seek Hannibal's mouth and feed his own words back to him. 'Tell me what *you* wish, Hannibal.'

Hands cupped his face and he pushed into them, lips meeting and parting again and again, tongues exploring with fervent passion. Finally they broke for air, foreheads pressed tightly together.

'Are more words needed?'

Hannibal's voice was hoarse, and Will reached up to cover one of his hands with his own.

'They are not.'

Turning his palm, Hannibal grasped Will's hand and brought it to his lips.

'If I could, I would take you to my bed this instant.'

At this, Will grinned. 'You can. You should.'

He was met with a questioning look, half hopeful. 'Your uncle and aunt?'

'They are on their way back to the inn – my aunt is feeling unwell. I am sure that it is nothing serious,' he added hastily. 'Probably she is fatigued after the activity of the last few days.'

'I hope that is the case.' Eyes filled with possessiveness and desire held him in thrall. 'And you, Will?'

'Have been invited by your sister to remain here for the night.'

Already in a state of feverish longing, Will was rendered entirely breathless by the smouldering look he received in response.

‘Then I may finally fulfil the promise I made to you in the grotto.’

*‘There is not an inch of you that I do not intend to know...’*

*Now.* The word thrummed in Hannibal’s head. *Now. Now.* No more hesitation. No more misunderstandings or interruptions. This was their time.

‘I am taking you to my bed, Will Graham.’

He felt the shudder of pleasure which jerked through the boy’s slender frame – searched Will’s eyes, darkened to midnight blue with wanton need – and asked anyway.

‘*If* you want this. Do you want this?’

‘Hannibal –’

‘Because we have been in this situation before.’

A sigh from the boy whose hands crept slowly around his waist, beneath his coat. ‘Hannibal –’

‘And I wish you to know that what happened in Kent will *never* –’

A swift kiss silenced him abruptly. And against his lips, Will whispered, ‘Hannibal. Please. Stop. Talking.’

The sweetness of his smile removed the sting from his words, and Hannibal gazed back at him with a feeling of utter helplessness.

‘The more time I spend with you, the more you enchant and bewilder me, Will Graham.’ Shaking his head, he offered a wry smile. ‘I am yours to command.’

The hall was empty as they emerged, sounds of music and conversation floating through the empty spaces. And there were no more words as side by side they climbed the stairs, hands almost but not quite touching. When they reached the uppermost landing, Hannibal turned and pulled Will into his arms for a deep, hungry kiss. Seeking fingers slid into his hair and clutched the back of his head, and for long moments they stood locked together, lost in each other. And when the ache became too much, rendering further delay intolerable, Hannibal took Will by the hand and led him down the myriad of corridors that ended at his bedchamber door.

All was darkness within, the candles having not yet been lit; but a small fire burned in the grate, enough to light Hannibal’s way as he strode to the windows and threw wide each floor-length curtain. Will joined him at the second casement, fingering thick folds of material, red brocade patterned in swirls of rich velvet, and cast an amused glance at the identical bedcovers.

‘Stags and snails, Hannibal?’

Unable to resist the lure of the boy whose scent pervaded his room so sweetly, Hannibal curved a hand around Will’s nape and drew him close.

‘That surprises you?’

Wandering hands began to divest Hannibal of his clothing, pulling off his gloves, pushing the coat from his shoulders and loosening his neckcloth.

‘The stags, of course not. But snails?’

‘A favourite of Mischa’s. She kept cochlear gardens as a child.’

Not to be outdone, Hannibal skimmed his fingers across the front of Will’s breeches, in search of the buttons which would release them. He drew in his breath at the tented hardness he encountered, and on impulse dropped to his knees.

‘Oh. Oh, yes.’

Will’s breathless plea emboldened him, and he turned his face into the boy’s stomach, worshipful. Bestowing hot kisses, he groaned aloud at the thick honey scent of Will’s slick.

He looked up then, and spoke in a voice grown hoarse. ‘I wish to see you in the moonlight, Will. I wish to see you bared to me. To touch and to taste. May I?’

Will trembled and smiled, reaching to capture Hannibal’s face between warm palms. ‘Please.’

Yet Will did not submit passively. With his eyes locked on Hannibal’s, he peeled away layer after layer, each revealed sliver of skin bathed in silver. And when at length he stood naked and proud and waiting, framed by the window, Hannibal reflected that never had he gazed upon a sight so fair.

*Michelangelo’s David made flesh.*

Silently he rose and pulled Will into his arms. Curving his hands beneath Will’s bottom, he lifted the boy, who immediately wrapped supple legs around Hannibal’s waist and slender arms around his neck. Hannibal carried him to the bed and lowered himself onto the edge. Still almost fully dressed, he sat with Will naked astride his lap and nuzzled into his neck, breathing him in. Will dipped his head on a sigh and they kissed, languorously at first and then with more urgency as Hannibal caressed the lithe lines of Will’s body and Will arched against him.

‘I did not think to hold you again.’ Tenderly, Hannibal traced kisses across delicate collarbones. ‘To taste you again.’ He captured a nipple between his lips and suckled. ‘Perfect rosebuds,’ he murmured, moving to its twin. ‘Perfectly delicious.’

‘Do not stop,’ Will gasped. ‘Oh, do not stop.’

But the insistent length nudging Hannibal’s stomach had now his full attention, and with delight he enclosed it, hard and pink and satin-smooth, within the tunnel of his curled fingers. Will grasped his face, tilting it upwards to claim another deep kiss, as Hannibal continued to stroke him to squirming, panting ecstasy. They fell backwards on the bed and rolled onto their sides, facing each other. Hannibal paused to remove his boots, barely managing to do so before clutching hands pulled him down again. More kisses followed, more sweet sighs shared. But it was not enough. Not nearly enough.

‘I will know you,’ he growled, pulling free to skim his fingers down the graceful curve of Will’s neck, across peaked nipples, along the ridges and planes of ribs and hipbones. ‘I will know *all* of you.’

Seeking between Will's thighs, he groaned as his fingertips encountered slippery warmth. Will did not speak, but his heart beat frantically beneath Hannibal's cheek as Hannibal rubbed slow circles around his entrance. It took very little for the sensitive ring of muscle to open up for him, and soon he was lost in delightful slick heat, wishing only to pleasure the writhing Omega. As his fingertips brushed the most sensitive spot deep within, he trailed kisses across Will's abdomen and finally, greedily, took his beautifully pulsing length into his mouth.

*Salty sweet and delicious.*

Will's eyes fluttered closed, red lips parting on a gasp as he shook with the force of his release. And Hannibal drank with utter delight, one hand rubbing across the tautness of Will's belly.

'I am s-sorry. Sorry.' Will gasped out the words, one arm thrown across his eyes.

Hannibal's knot had filled, throbbing and persistent, but he paid it no mind. Propping himself up on one elbow, he passed a tender hand across Will's damp curls.

'Sorry for giving me such pleasure? For allowing me the privilege of knowing you so intimately?' He took Will's mouth in a lingering kiss. 'You are exquisite.'

Dark-fringed eyes peeped at him, startlingly blue against the blush of his cheeks.

'I wanted you inside me. I wanted to feel that again.'

'Oh Will, never fear. Before the sun rises, I promise you will feel me so deep inside, you shall remember it for a long time to come.' On a wicked impulse, Hannibal whispered into his ear, 'And I *always* keep my promises.'

A slow smirk spread across Will's face and he reached for Hannibal again.

As their kisses grew increasingly heated, Hannibal broke off with a reluctant sigh. 'I should return downstairs before my absence is noted.' He looked at Will, supine and drowsy and sated, and smiled. 'You look so comfortable, I hesitate to suggest that you accompany me. But I would not wish to deprive you of supper.'

'Do not worry on that account. I have little care for eating so late. Besides, I want to stay here, in your bed.' Rubbing his palms across the coverlet, Will added softly, 'It smells of you.'

Hannibal groaned. 'You do not make it easy for me, Will.'

How tempting was the notion to abandon entirely his duties as host. But with a supreme effort, he pulled himself away. At the looking-glass over the mantelpiece he re-tied his neckcloth, with no little difficulty given the scant lighting; then he scooped his coat and boots from the floor and, with a final longing glance at the beautiful Omega sprawled grinning across his bed, backed hastily out of the room.

# Interlude

Chapter Notes

Miss Austen, please forgive me!

Will awoke to pitch darkness. The fire in the grate had turned to ash; and through the sash windows, clouds smeared the sky, obscuring the moon's brilliance. Despite Hannibal's careful, tender lovemaking, Will's body ached and thrummed, and he realised with a frown that he was covered in a fine sheen of perspiration.

He sat up and swung his legs from the bed. They felt a trifle wobbly, and he crossed gingerly to the nearest window, fumbling for the latch. It gave easily and he pushed open the casement. Cool night air swept over his skin, giving instant relief. The clouds parted again, allowing a shaft of moonlight to penetrate and illuminating the still waters of the Canal Pond. No fountain played there now, and the clashing stags were thrown into eerie relief against the night sky.

Shivering, Will returned to the bed. Hannibal's scent was perceptible still; and wishing to surround himself with it, he pulled back the covers to burrow beneath them. Soon he was dozing, face pressed to Hannibal's pillow, and not long afterwards sleep claimed him again.

The next time he stirred, it was to the click of a door followed by the soft susurrus of material sliding from skin. The mattress dipped and a warm body slipped under the covers, familiar arms gathering him against a familiar broad chest.

With a sigh, Will turned and buried his face against Hannibal's neck, the rich earthiness of his Alpha scent soothing the ache which throbbed deep within.

Soothing it and at the same time...

'I am glad that you are back,' he breathed, fingers exploring firm muscle beneath coarse hair.

'Mm. As am I.'

Gentle touches and lingering kisses followed, until inevitably both were roused again to passion. When large hands cupped his bottom, fingers spreading to massage the firm flesh, Will groaned his pleasure and sought Hannibal's lips for a deep kiss. It was some time before he again spoke, and his voice was husky with need.

'You have a promise to keep.'

Hannibal chuckled, a deep-throated sound. 'Yes, I do.'

Suddenly Will found himself rolled atop the powerful Alpha. He gasped as Hannibal grasped his legs, parting them to set him firmly astride.

'Now.' Gently, Hannibal clasped his hips and urged him upwards. 'Kneel, Will. This shall be for you to control.'

A familiar position, this, and Will's heart swelled at the thought that Hannibal was doing all in his power to put him at ease. Setting his hands on Hannibal's chest, he began a slow rocking, his slick rendering the slide effortless. The intimate press of their bodies was exquisite, and soon he was panting his pleasure.

'Now, please. Please, Hannibal.'

Eyes dark with desire, Hannibal reached between them and began a firm, insistent stroking along Will's length. 'I am most *assuredly* yours to command.'

And when, moments later, Will felt the press of hard flesh within him, his eyes fluttered closed in ecstasy.

‘See, Will? Your body gives beautifully to mine.’

Revelling in the rough cadence of Hannibal’s voice, Will sank down until he felt the Alpha’s swelling knot pressing at his entrance. Immediately, Hannibal’s hands clamped around his hips.

‘No, Will.’

Hurt welled unexpectedly and he stilled.

‘You said we were designed for this.’

‘And we are.’ Hannibal resumed his caresses, voice softer now. ‘But knotting is for mating, Will. For bonding. If I were to knot you, I would wish to mate with you. And I know that is not what you want.’

*Not what I want.*

Thumbs stroked his nipples, clouding his mind, confusing his senses.

‘I wish to give you pleasure, Will. Allow me to give you that.’

Stroking the sensitive buds to tightness, until Will was moving again, lost to sensation. Lost to everything.

*Everything but this. Everything but him.*

Hannibal brought up his knees and Will arched back, clutching the Alpha’s thighs, gasping as Hannibal drove into him again and again. Until he felt himself tightening deliciously within, drawing from Hannibal a long, loud groan and a final series of staccato thrusts. Unsteady fingers closed around his swollen sex and he cried out, throwing back his head as they peaked together.

Afterwards, lying in Hannibal’s embrace amidst crumpled sheets, Will stroked the arm curled around his waist and listened to the Alpha’s steady, deep breathing.

*Not what I want?*

His own words, turned against him. Yet that had been *before*. When stubbornness and doubt and insecurity had resulted in mistakes on *both* sides. Before he had known Hannibal’s heart. Before he had truly known his *own*. He thought of the letter, tucked away in the pocket of his favourite coat, and of the words that resonated from it like the sweetest music.

*‘... without agenda or hope of return.*

*I love you.’*

Hannibal sighed, his breath stirring Will’s hair.

*I love you.*

Heart pounding, Will eased out from beneath Hannibal's arm. He sat up and looked sightlessly past his own reflection. Dawn had painted the sky in delicate pastel hues, and the first tentative notes of birdsong floated up through the open window.

*I love you.*

He gazed back down at the man lying beside him, body lax in sleep, stern features softened. And a surge of emotion – hitherto unnameable – washed over him.

*Master, brother, friend, lover. How many people's happiness are in your guardianship? How much power is in your possession to do good or evil, to bestow pleasure or pain?*

Bending, he pressed a kiss to Hannibal's jaw, prickly now with stubble. Another to his cheek. And against his lips, he whispered with infinite tenderness, 'Hannibal Lecter, without agenda or hope of return, I love you.'

***

The space beside him was cold when Hannibal was roused to wakefulness by his valet's discreet cough.

'I beg your pardon, sir, but you wished to be informed when Mr Lecter was awake.'

Blinking, Hannibal sat up and ran a hand through his hair. 'Yes, thank you, Umber.'

'I have drawn your bath, sir.'

'Very good.'

'And I have ordered fresh linen.' After a pause, he added, 'I believe that Mr Graham has already taken breakfast and is at present walking in the grounds.'

With a respectful bow, Umber disappeared into the adjoining bath chamber, leaving Hannibal to muse upon the very good fortune he had had in engaging such a discreet and industrious servant. Will's scent permeated the sheets, and while nothing would have pleased Hannibal more than to preserve that delicious fragrance, the myriad damp patches were rather less appealing.

A quarter of an hour later, refreshed and decidedly more respectable in appearance, he descended the stairs eager to locate his Omegan lover. For lovers they most certainly were; and if he could not persuade Will to mate with and marry him, then he would endeavour at least to have *this* for as long as Will would allow.

Preoccupied almost to the point of brooding, it was not until he entered the dining parlour and saw his uncle tucking into grilled bone that Hannibal remembered why he had been awoken in the first place.

'Good morning, Uncle. I am glad to see you are suffering no ill effects from last night.'

Robert Lecter looked up, fork halfway to his mouth, and waved it in greeting.

'Ah, Hannibal. At last. I was beginning to wonder whether I was destined to spend my final hours here quite alone.'

‘Your final hours?’

Quirking a brow, Hannibal wandered over to the side table and poured himself a cup of tea from the silver service.

‘Are you expecting not to return from the wilds of Paris?’

‘You know precisely what I mean.’ He received an arch stare. ‘The only person I have seen since rising this morning is your young man.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Now it was *his* turn to glare. ‘What precisely do you mean by that?’

His uncle harrumphed. ‘Do not pretend to be affronted, Hannibal. It does not suit you.’ He lay down his fork and fixed his nephew with a shrewd eye. ‘Did you think that I noticed nothing of what was occurring last night?’

Hannibal’s eyes hardened. ‘Will Graham is not a subject for idle gossip, Uncle.’

But Robert Lecter merely smiled. ‘I am glad to hear it. He seems a most commendable young person. Set on joining his uncle’s law practice, is not he?’ And he nodded approvingly. ‘I have some knowledge of Mr Crawford. He is well-respected in legal circles. Although,’ he added, ‘I have often wondered at the benefits of apprenticeship. Far too much observing and too little actual practise. Best just to get stuck in, in my view.’

Hannibal stared. ‘How is it that you are so well acquainted with Mr Graham’s plans?’ And then, with a growl of annoyance, ‘Anthony.’

Looking not at all chastened, his uncle admitted airily, ‘It just so happens that I did chance to stop in at Valentine Hall on my way down.’

‘And did it also *just so happen* that Anthony felt it necessary to regale you with details of our visit to Kent?’

‘He might have mentioned the subject once or twice.’

‘With a particular emphasis on our encounters with Mr Graham, I suppose.’

‘Well, Mr Graham was not the *sole* topic of conversation, but -‘

‘I shall throttle my cousin!’

‘Hannibal,’ interjected his uncle gently, ‘Anthony may at times be a trifle indiscreet, but he is not malicious. He said nothing that was injurious either to Mr Graham or to you.’ Reaching out, he touched Hannibal’s arm. ‘Rather, he was concerned for you – specifically for the precipitous manner of your leaving Kent, and for your state of mind afterwards. Besides,’ he added with a twinkle, ‘after last night’s comings and goings, you can be certain I would have formed my *own* suspicions. I have eyes, my dear nephew.’

*Somewhat* mollified, Hannibal nevertheless made a mental note to have several choice words with his cousin at the next available opportunity. And as for his uncle’s teasing...

‘I trust that you have not spoken such nonsense to Mr Graham.’

‘Hannibal, really.’ Robert Lecter tutted crossly. ‘That you should even ask! Besides, I did not actually speak to the boy – I merely saw him, wandering about outside with that infernal dog of yours.’ He picked up his cutlery again and heaved an exaggerated sigh. ‘Although at least *he* is not wasting half the day in sleep. A pity the same cannot be said for the rest of your household.’

‘It is barely nine o’clock.’

‘Even so.’ Suddenly serious, his uncle looked at him earnestly. ‘Hannibal, I hope that you are not trifling with the boy’s feelings.’

Hannibal froze in the act of raising his cup to his lips. ‘Trifling?‘

‘You are being hesitant, which is most unlike you. Usually I would not speak of such things, but in the circumstances...’

‘And what *circumstances* would those be?’ he gritted, a surge of protectiveness for Will welling within him.

‘I know, of course, that he is Omegan,’ continued his uncle gently. ‘And consequently an excellent match.’

‘Will is not defined by his Omegan status,’ muttered Hannibal, the next moment reddening as he realised his error.

‘Neither is *Will* defined by his origins.’

At this, Hannibal looked up sharply. ‘Then you know.’

‘That the boy’s natural mother is not Mrs Graham? Yes, I know.’

‘And yet you would not advise me against entering into such a union?’

‘Hannibal Lecter, do not you know me at all?’ A rare frown creased his uncle’s brow. ‘I hope that it is not his situation which gives *you* pause.’

‘No, it is not,’ snapped Hannibal, rising from his chair and pacing to the window. Guilt at the memory of his behaviour towards Will in the early days of their acquaintance weighed heavily on him in that moment. And then there was Fogmear... He stared out bleakly, confronted with the memory of a day he wished only to forget. ‘And since you press me to say it, I will tell you in confidence that I proposed marriage to Mr Graham in Kent, and he refused me.’

A short silence followed.

‘May I ask why?’

*‘You do not want to love me... You do not want any of this...’*

The tightness in Hannibal’s chest increased. He swung around, lips twisted in a mirthless smile. ‘Because there was a time when his situation *did* give me pause. He knew it and he quite rightly told me to go to the devil.’

‘I see.’ Robert Lecter eyed him speculatively. ‘And yet here you both are.’ He held up a hand to pre-empt Hannibal’s protest. ‘I am aware that I am in no little danger of overstepping my bounds,

and I shall say no more about it – except that you should not be too discouraged, my boy.' And then the twinkle was back. 'Indeed, judging by the way Mr Graham was looking at you last night, you should not be discouraged at all!'

At this, Hannibal could not suppress a rueful smile. 'I shall miss you, Uncle. Do not stay away for too long.'

'No, no.' And without looking up. 'I shall be sure to return for the wedding.'

*'Uncle!'*

***

'Ripper, stop!'

Will swatted away the cold nose that was pushing insistently into his cheek. Thus far, he had greatly enjoyed his walk; following the directions of an under-gardener, he had at last located the elusive hunting tower, and after having taken an impromptu swim in a nearby woodland pond, he lay now amidst lush, ankle-high grass, stripped down to shirt and breeches, gazing sleepily up at the elegant stone facade.

Chastised, Ripper wandered off to snuffle at a nearby patch of forget-me-nots, and Will closed his eyes with a sigh. If only he could slough off the physical discomfort that had driven him from the bliss of Hannibal's bed – limbs restless and skin too tight, too hot. But even his swim had provided only temporary relief.

The sun stroked warm fingers across his face, lulling him at length into a light slumber. And for a while, soothed by the breeze and the muffled symphony of birdsong, he slept.

***

'Will?'

Stirring slightly, he frowned. Something felt wrong.

'Will, wake up.'

Hannibal, and a tone that demanded immediate compliance. Will opened his mouth to retort, but all that issued forth was a whimper.

*Something is wrong. What is wrong with me?*

Hannibal repeated his name, impatience tinged with something disconcertingly close to panic colouring his voice. 'Will, open your eyes. Now!'

'Stop shouting!'

Scowling, he blinked hard, and Hannibal's towering form swam into view.

'I would if you would do as you were told the first time.' But beneath the snap, Hannibal's relief was tangible.

Will struggled to sit up as confusion gripped him. His breeches were wet. Wet again, after his swim? But no, they had dried as he had lain beneath the sun...

Then there it was – the unmistakable scent of slick. Uncontrollable, copious slick. And suddenly everything made dreadful sense. The restlessness, the persistent aches, his increased body temperature. *Oh no.*

Hannibal crouched before him, trying to conceal his worry, and laid a cool hand against his brow.

'You have a fever,' he muttered; then the next moment he inhaled sharply, eyes flying to Will's. Eyes turned suddenly almost black.

'I know,' whispered Will miserably. 'Hannibal, I believe I am going into heat.

*Focus. What can you do?*

'Stay here.'

Squeezing Will's shoulder, Hannibal stood up abruptly and walked towards the hunting tower. On either side of the short flight of steps leading to the front door, a pair of fierce-eyed ravens carved in stone perched atop symmetrical pillars. Hannibal took hold of one of the ravens and tilted it sideways, revealing a hollow base and a large key concealed beneath. He cast an anxious glance back at Will. Ripper had appeared from beneath a twisted clump of rhododendron bushes, and Will now sat half-slumped against the panting dog.

'I shall be only a few minutes,' he said, in what he hoped was a reassuring tone, and Will managed a faint smile of acknowledgment.

The tower's accommodations were basic, but fortunately all was in readiness for the start of the shooting season. A quick check of the second floor bedchamber revealed that the four-poster bed had been made up with fresh linen. The small fireplaces in each room had been laid and the kitchen was stocked with basic necessities.

Hannibal returned to find Will waiting at the bottom of the steps. Flushed and clearly embarrassed, he managed to look everywhere but at Hannibal as he asked, 'Should not we return to the house?'

'We could,' was Hannibal's slow reply. 'If that is what you would like. I thought perhaps you might prefer somewhere a little more private.'

At that last word, Will's blush deepened. 'I – yes, thank you. That is most considerate.'

*Considerate?*

Bristling a little at Will's distant politeness, Hannibal suppressed the urge to snap at him, but his frustration lessened considerably when he saw how mortified the boy was. He descended the steps and, without preamble, pulled Will into his arms.

Had he felt the least resistance, he would have released him instantly, but Will melted into his embrace with a choked, 'Hannibal'.

'I have you,' he murmured roughly. 'I have you, Will.'

Once inside, it seemed the most prudent course of action to install Will immediately upstairs. Hannibal led the way up the winding turret staircase and into the bedchamber, all the while holding fast to Will's hand.

'It is a trifle stuffy in here, but an open window will soon take care of that.'

Will cast an uncertain glance at the bed. 'I do not wish to ruin the sheets.'

'Nonsense.' Relinquishing Will's hand, Hannibal leaned across and, in one brisk motion, stripped off the coverlet and dropped it onto the floor. 'There. And there is fresh bedding in the closet. I shall instruct my valet to bring a change of clothes.'

Will blinked. 'Oh, my coat and boots. They are still outside.'

'Do not worry. I shall retrieve them.' Hannibal hesitated. 'In the meantime, you should remove those breeches, Will. You cannot be comfortable.'

Will huffed a laugh. 'That is somewhat of an understatement.'

Their eyes met, and Hannibal itched to go to him again. But the lure of the scent-drenched Omega was already proving exceedingly difficult to resist, and if Will's heat triggered a rut...

'I will send word to your uncle that you are indisposed. And I shall enquire after your aunt.'

He backed towards the staircase, attempting valiantly to ignore the look of disappointment on Will's face.

'I will come back as soon as I am able

Will did not dwell long on Hannibal's stilted and uncomfortable exit – other considerations quickly took precedence. Despite the open window, the atmosphere in the room grew increasingly stultifying as his body temperature rose still higher. Having stripped off his soaked breeches and drawers the moment he had heard the front door close, he soon found it necessary to rid himself of his shirt as well. Discarding his ruined clothes in a rolled-up ball beside the bed, he crawled between blissfully cool sheets and prayed that the worst would soon be over.

***

*'Close your eyes, Will. Relax your body.'*

*'I shall try.'*

*Sobs subsiding, he took several deep breaths. Allowed his muscles to grow lax.*

*'Good. Now, I want you to picture your favourite place in the whole world. Can you do that?'*

*'Yes.'*

*Father's stream, through the woods behind our house.*

*'Think about what you can hear...'*

*Rushing water, birdsong - that comical chorus of wood pigeons, an occasional gust of wind shaking the tree branches.*

*'...and smell...'*

*The freshness of the water, almost sweet on my tongue. Earth and grass.*

*'...and feel.'*

*Cold up to my waist. Pebbles between my toes. Sun on my face.*

*'Are you there now, Will?'*

*'Yes.'*

*'And is it helping?'*

*'It eases the ache.'*

*'I am glad to hear it.'*

*'What do I do now?'*

*'Now you stay there, Will, for as long as you need to. And whenever you want to go there again, you just put your head back, close your eyes, and wade into the quiet of the stream. Do you understand?'*

*Will turned his tear-stained face to the side, eyes full of gratitude.*

*'I think so. Yes. Thank you, Aunt.'*

***

'Will.'

*That scent...*

'Will.'

*The freshness of the water, almost sweet on my tongue. Earth and grass.*

'Will, come back.'

A weight on the bed and a gentle palm cupping his cheek pulled him from his deep reverie.

'Hannibal?' He opened his eyes with an effort and smiled. 'It is you.'

'Of course it is me.' Hannibal looked at him quizzically. 'Can you sit up?'

At that, Will scowled. 'I am not ill.'

Annoyingly, it was after all something of an effort to push himself upright, but Hannibal did not comment. Instead, he reached across to the adjacent dressing table and took up a cup and jug, pouring out a generous amount of water.

‘Here, drink this. It is perfectly fresh – I took it from the stream that runs behind the tower.’

Will took the cup and sipped the ice cold liquid, eyeing Hannibal over the rim. ‘Where is Ripper?’

‘I returned him to the house. He would be only a liability here.’

‘I suppose so. Have you heard from my uncle?’

Hannibal shook his head.

‘I sent a servant to deliver the message but he is not yet returned.’

His reply sounded strained, and suddenly Will was excruciatingly aware that not only was he naked beneath the thin sheet bunched about his waist, but that he was hard and dripping.

He handed back the cup and dropped his gaze, fingers plaiting into the sheet as he fought the urge to cover himself completely.

‘You should go.’

But Hannibal did not move. ‘I do not want you to be alone.’

‘For this I think it is best that I am.’

‘Will.’ Hannibal’s voice was a rough caress. ‘Look at me.’

When he did not immediately comply, his chin was tilted by a gentle finger, and with a sound of frustration he lifted reluctant eyes to the Alpha’s.

Hannibal regarded him with brow furrowed. ‘Am I intruding? Have I overstepped my bounds bringing you here?’

‘No, of course not.’ Will bit his lip.

‘Then why do you wish me away?’

Increasingly agitated, Will sought vainly for the right words.

*Because I am afraid. Afraid that I will demand too much. That you will come to see this as a trap. That the ugliness of obligation will taint the beauty of exploration.*

But when it came to expressing these fears, he found himself frustratingly mute. And Hannibal’s expression grew wary.

‘Is it a question of trust? Are you afraid that I will hurt you if I stay?’

Frustration boiled over quickly into anger. ‘You fool.’ His voice shook and he knocked Hannibal’s hand away, glaring fiercely. ‘It is not *you* I do not trust. It is *myself*.’

For a few moments, Hannibal looked at him impassively, the air between them humming with tension.

‘Do you imagine there is anything you could ask of me that I would not willingly give?’

‘You are not comfortable. I can see it.’ He tried not to sound accusing.

‘Will.’ Hannibal sighed harshly. ‘I do not wish to take advantage of you.’

‘Do you want me?’ he countered?

Amber eyes burned into his. ‘Yes, I want you.’

‘Do you want me because I am in heat?’

‘I shall not dignify that with a response.’

Will placed a palm over Hannibal’s heart. It raced as if in sympathy with his own, and suddenly there was nothing to fear. ‘Neither do you need to. Because I know that you want me – *me*, Hannibal.’

‘I am relieved to hear it.’ But his face had lost some of its hauteur and he laid his own hand over Will’s.

Earnestly, Will held his gaze. ‘Then please extend the same courtesy to me.’

Without breaking eye contact, Hannibal carried Will’s hand to his lips. He feathered soft kisses over the knuckles, and would probably have gone no further had not Will reached out to trace those beautiful lips with trembling fingers.

Scent bloomed thickly between them. Hannibal’s. His own. And the inches separating their bodies seemed suddenly an unacceptable gulf. Something mortifyingly close to a whine escaped Will’s lips, and he sought instinctively to hide the fresh bloom on his cheeks by ducking his head into Hannibal’s chest.

Comforting arms closed around him. ‘What can I do, Will?’

Will sighed, pressing closer, wrapping his arms around Hannibal’s waist. ‘I do not know.’

Hannibal rested his chin atop Will’s head, breathing him in, the boy’s natural scent elevated to fevered sweetness. It called to that instinct deep within him – that terrible need to *take mate bite* – which he knew was typically Alphan, but which he had long ago rejected in disgust as something base, a crude throwback to an uncivilised age. Yet surely there could be nothing less than beautiful in what he felt for Will: a whole-hearted desire to cherish and adore and worship with body and with soul.

Will pushed into his touch, nudging his chin up, nuzzling against his throat.

‘I know only that I need you, Hannibal.’

The words were breathed into Hannibal’s skin.

‘*Please*.’

And then there was no more hesitation, no more holding back.

Grasping Will’s face, Hannibal brought their mouths together in a kiss of devouring hunger. His eagerness was matched by the unclothed boy, who rose to his knees and gripped Hannibal’s coat,

pressing against him in a long trembling line. Exploring fingers swept down the beautiful bow of Will's back, following the ridges of his spine. Appreciating the loveliness of the Omega's body as once he would have sighed over the exquisite construction of a Stradivarius. And as Hannibal's fingertips dipped below the curve of Will's bottom to trace teasingly around his swollen slickness, Will moaned and shuddered against him.

'Lie down,' murmured Hannibal, bestowing a lingering kiss on Will's parted lips. 'Allow me to take care of you.'

*Allow me to love you.*

As slowly he undressed, it was at first enough to gaze and take his fill of lissom limbs and blue eyes heavy-lidded with desire; to listen to Will's impatient sighs and fretful sounds with more pleasure than could ever be derived from the finest Bach concerto; the anticipation a thrill in itself.

And then, at last, the rapture of moving over and against the beautiful body of the beautiful boy who moved against him. He pressed tender lips to Will's hot cheeks, the hollow of his throat, the dewy skin over his rapidly beating heart.

But when he went to take Will into his mouth, the heat-honeyed scent of slick sent his pulse into a discordant frenzy. Almost without volition, he sought blindly the source – that delicate, quivering ring of muscle now flushed bright red and glistening – and with a feral growl he pierced deep with his tongue. Will arched from the bed with a loud cry, grasping Hannibal's hair. The gesture, at once demanding and submissive, only served to increase Hannibal's ardency. Greedily he sucked, glorying in the taste, the scent, the high little cries wrung from Will. Until it was no longer enough.

'Turn over.'

He hardly recognised his own voice in the low rasp, but Will complied with unhesitating eagerness, rolling onto his stomach before scrambling onto hands and knees, curving his spine, tilting his hips.

*Presenting. For me.*

Sliding his arm around Will's waist, securing him so that they were skin to skin, Hannibal took himself in hand and, feverish in his desperation, entered Will in one swift thrust. Will cried out, writhing back against him, and Hannibal groaned as the muscles of Will's hot, tight passage contracted around him. He grasped Will's curls and tugged, pulling him up and back against the length of his body until his swelling knot encountered the barrier of Will's sweetly rounded cheeks. The temptation to push on – to plunge his knot deep and make Will irrevocably *his* – bit with savage force, and he froze, horrified by the urge.

Will wriggled fretfully. 'Do not stop.'

When the only response he received was a deep shudder, he reached up and twined his fingers in Hannibal's hair, tugging none-too gently.

'I shall not break, Hannibal.'

The almost-snarl which vibrated through both of them should, perhaps, have alarmed him, but Will felt in that moment only a glorious sense of power. Hannibal wanted him. Hannibal wanted to *bond* with him. He could *feel* it. In the possessive clutch of Hannibal's hands, the rapid beating of his heart, the tight press of his forehead to Will's back. And oh, how Will wanted it too. Yet he knew

that they should not – not while lost in a haze of heat and lust. And not when Hannibal was still so clearly conflicted. For surely that way led only to doubts and regret. So he swallowed the pleading words and reached for the hand on his waist. Guiding it down, he placed it on his erect, dripping length, and moaned as Hannibal's fingers curled immediately around it.

'Yes, touch me.'

As Hannibal began slowly to stroke, Will undulated against him, gasping at the myriad of sensations flooding his overstimulated body. Suddenly, Hannibal surged up over him, hands moving to grip his hips. Unbalanced, Will fell forward onto the bed, braced on his forearms. He turned his cheek against the cool sheet, eyes half-closed in bliss, as Hannibal took him then with almost savage force, driving deep and hard. The rhythmic pummelling of the knot against Will's rim reduced him to incoherent whining, and when once more Hannibal reached beneath him to stroke and tug, he came with a fierce and desperate cry. Hannibal quickly followed, burying his face against Will's neck with a stifled groan.

***

They slept, and when they awoke they again made frantic love. Hannibal brought Will to the brink of ecstatic tears, pinning him down and suckling his nipples until they were so sensitive, Will climaxed untouched, sobbing. Then he took him, with gentle fingers encircling his throat, and Will came a second time as Hannibal, too, found his release.

For three days it was thus. They explored each other's bodies voraciously, with eager, seeking lips and tongues and fingers. They slept pressed together, Hannibal's body curved around Will's. Occasionally, Will heard hushed voices and muffled footsteps below, which explained the food which Hannibal would intermittently wake him with, and which they fed to each other with messy fingers and tender smiles.

On the fourth day, Will awoke clear-headed and fever-free. Head pillowed on Hannibal's chest, he looked up through a tangle of curls and felt a tug in his heart at the expression of contentment on the slumbering Alpha's face. Smiling, he crawled up over Hannibal's body and settled beside him, leaning over to bestow a feather-light kiss on lips slightly parted in sleep. When Hannibal only sighed and shifted slightly, Will repeated the action, to little more response. But when he slipped his tongue inside Hannibal's mouth, he found himself captured by firm hands, rolled over onto his back and pinned beneath a deliciously heavy weight. Giggling, he grinned up at Hannibal, who was attempting an expression of sternness.

'Good morning.'

'Hmph. It would have been better had you woken me at least an hour after dawn.'

Will snorted. 'Look at the clock on the mantle, Hannibal. Dawn was *several* hours ago.'

Alert eyes narrowed on his face and Hannibal reached up, pressing the back of his hand to Will's forehead.

'Your fever has broken.'

'Yes.'

'Your heat is at an end?'

There was something almost akin to regret in Hannibal's tone, and Will grasped his hand, bringing it to his lips before releasing it.

Softly then, 'I believe so. And you?'

Hannibal nudged Will's face aside with his nose to scent gently at his neck. 'An Alpha's rut is dependent on an Omega's heat, Will. Yes, I am myself again.'

Will stiffened slightly at that, and Hannibal lifted his head to shoot him a reproving look. 'Which means only that as well as wanting you just as much as ever, I would very much like to take a bath.'

Mollified, Will wrapped his arms around Hannibal's neck and pulled him down into a tight embrace.

'Later,' he murmured against his lips, and for full an hour not another word was spoken.

***

The next time he surfaced, Will found himself alone. Light streamed in high through the open window, the sun at its meridian, and a welcome breeze stirred the sultry air. Blinking, he sat up and stretched, yawning widely. He cocked his head, listening to the sound of familiar footsteps, and trained his eyes on the door expectantly. When Hannibal appeared, clothed in breeches and a hastily tucked-in shirt, wet hair falling in spiked tendrils across his forehead, Will quirked an eyebrow.

'Have you been swimming?'

It was then that he noticed the note in Hannibal's hand.

He held it up. 'From your aunt.'

'Oh, how is she?'

A blush of shame spread across Will's cheeks, for until this moment he had quite forgotten poor, ailing Mrs Crawford.

But Hannibal was smiling. 'Quite recovered. It was, after all, a temporary malady. Possibly, your aunt surmises, a result of eating questionable fish for lunch on the day of the ball.'

Will's brow creased. 'I thought that she was suffering from a headache. And I do not remember fish on the menu that day.'

Hannibal came to sit beside Will, running gentle fingers through his hair and pulling taut the curls before releasing them. Immediately, all thoughts of Mrs Crawford's mysterious short-lived illness evaporated, and Will leaned into Hannibal's touch, eyes half-closed in indolent pleasure.

'Come back to bed.'

'Oh no.' Rising smartly, Hannibal pursed his lips and held out his hand. 'I am taking you to bathe, Mr Graham. There is a pond nearby that I use often for such a purpose. It is perfectly secluded.'

'Is that where you took your bath today?'

‘It is. And it was most invigorating.’

‘You mean cold.’

‘I mean cleansing.’

Will pouted. ‘Are you suggesting that my smell is objectionable?’

‘I am suggesting that when we receive your uncle this evening, it might be considered impolitic of us to greet him smelling of each *other*.’

‘Oh.’ Battling disappointment, Will endeavoured not to allow it to show. ‘He is coming to take me back?’

‘He is.’

Will allowed himself to be tugged up; and as he was drawn in for a lingering kiss, he wound his arms around Hannibal’s neck and tightened them possessively.

*I do not wish to go.*

‘Mrs Crawford has been anxious for your wellbeing and is eager to see you.’ Eyes glinting, hands sweeping delicious trails across Will’s skin, Hannibal added, ‘However, I am of a mind to hold a dinner on Friday next; and as it will doubtless continue until dawn, it may be that you are obliged once again to send your uncle and aunt home in the carriage and lodge here for the night. Do not you think?’

‘Definitely,’ grinned Will, pressing close and capturing Hannibal’s mouth in another hungry kiss.

It was mid-afternoon before finally they stumbled from the room.

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Hannibal had ever been proud of his iron resolve, but watching Will frolic in the clear waters of Cascade Pond was enough to test even his usually indomitable self-possession. They had ventured forth wearing only breeches and shirts – rather too little for public display in Hannibal’s view, although admittedly the contrasting textures beneath his feet, of soft grass and warm earth and crisp bracken, had proven most pleasant – yet the moment they had arrived at the pond, Will had immediately stripped down to his drawers. He stood now hip-deep, a pale nymph among blushing water lilies, face tilted to the light which spilled on him like liquid gold. So beautiful, Hannibal could scarce draw breath.

‘Do you intend to stand there until sunset?’

‘Perhaps.’ He smiled, still riveted. ‘I have at present little motivation to move.’

‘Is that so?’ Will stepped out into slightly shallower water, the thin undergarment clinging and transparent. And with a coquettish smirk, ‘Are you quite certain?’

‘Will Graham, you are outrageous,’ growled Hannibal, but already he was pulling his shirt free of his breeches. He cast it off and waded in, eyes fixed on the grinning minx of an Omega who held him so in thrall. Catching him easily, he wound possessive arms about his slender waist and pulled him close, huffing in amusement as Will’s hands fell immediately to unbuttoning his breeches.

‘You wear far too many clothes.’

‘And you, so often, astonishingly few.’

Will’s slender fingers wrapped around his length, cool and water-slick against his heated flesh, and gladly Hannibal surrendered the argument, eyes narrowing in pleasure. When he spilled, it was with head bowed, lips pressed to Will’s damp curls.

After a leisurely swim, they lay side by side on the grassy bank, heads pillowed on moss, fingers tangled together. And as their clothes dried in the muggy warmth of afternoon, they talked. They

talked as they had one cold, crisp November morning in Hertfordshire, of art and culture and music. And Hannibal found himself falling in love all over again.

‘Have you read Beckford?’ Idly he reached across and plucked a burr from Will’s hair.

Will hummed. ‘My father’s library has a copy of Vathek, but I confess it is not to my taste. I prefer encyclopaedias to novels.’

‘I was thinking more of his letters. Specifically, Dreams, Waking Thoughts and Incidents.’ And upon Will’s enquiring look, ‘A collection detailing his European travels. Beckford gave a copy to my father after he sojourned here one summer as a young man. I shall look it out for you – given your fascination with the Continent, I believe you would enjoy it.’

‘Thank you,’ Will said softly, leaning in to bestow a kiss which Hannibal was only too willing to accept.

‘Waking thoughts.’ A sigh escaped Will’s lips, and the tender light in his eyes brought a lump to Hannibal’s throat. ‘I thought of you often, after Kent. Every day. Every night.’ He smiled dreamily. ‘One evening, I stood by my bedchamber window, looking up at the night sky – Orion above the horizon and, near it, Jupiter. And I wondered if you could see it too. I wondered if our stars were the same.’

Infinitely moved, Hannibal tucked a curl behind Will’s ear, choosing his words with care. ‘I believe that some of our stars will always be the same. It is my dearest wish that they should be.’

They fell once more to silence, heads close together, hands still entwined.

***

Upon their return to the hunting tower, they found waiting for them a light repast of bread, cold meats and plump vine tomatoes fresh from the greenhouse. Conversation was more fragmented now, the mood decidedly subdued as the hour of Mr Crawford’s arrival approached. Wishing to bring a smile once more to Will’s face, Hannibal took up a knife and proceeded to carve the skin from the largest of the tomatoes, rolling it carefully into the shape of a rose.

‘For you.’

Fingers stained red and dripping juice, he held out the delicately twisted bud across the kitchen table. Will accepted it with a delighted chuckle.

‘Am I to eat this or find a vase for it?’

But the shine in his eyes belied his light-hearted response.

Hannibal’s heart too ached at the thought of their imminent separation – so much remained unsaid and unresolved between them. Yet it was hardly a permanent goodbye; Will would not be returning to Hertfordshire for full another week.

They dressed in fresh clothes laid out by Umber in their absence. Hannibal tied Will’s neckcloth, and then stood patiently as Will reciprocated with blue eyes full of laughter, exclaiming over his own clumsy attempts to manipulate the length of linen into a serviceable arrangement.

‘At home we do not use half so much starch, I think!’

Despite the less-than-impeccable result, Hannibal would not have adjusted it for the world.

***

It was a fine, still evening of muted birdsong and creeping shadows. They heard the curricle's approach as it clattered up the winding track, and walked out onto the flight of steps to wait.

'I hope the journey back to the inn is not too wearisome.' Hannibal's voice was husky. 'The curricle will take you back to the house, where your carriage is waiting.'

'You are not coming with us?'

'No, I prefer to say farewell to you here, Will.'

He heard a sigh, and the next moment felt the gentle press of Will's forehead between his shoulder blades. His lover's arms slipped around his waist.

'Thank you, Hannibal. These few days have meant –'

Will's voice faltered and Hannibal's chest tightened. He grasped Will's hand and lifted it to his lips, bowing his head to press kisses to the palm. And when, inevitably, that was not enough, he turned and claimed Will's lips as well.

A jangling of harness announced the curricle's arrival, and with supreme reluctance Hannibal broke the kiss.

Mr Crawford waved from the driver's seat, face wreathed in smiles.

'Hello there. Will, dear boy, it is a relief to see you looking so well.'

'Thank you, Uncle.'

Suffused with a delightful blush, Will descended the hunting tower steps, and Hannibal followed close behind, protectiveness overriding discretion.

'I took the liberty of driving myself, Mr Lecter. I hope you do not mind. Your butler furnished me with excellent directions.'

'Not at all. You have saved my groom a long walk back, which no doubt he appreciates greatly,' commented Hannibal, eyes still on Will, who glanced back at him with a brief, self-conscious smile before mounting the passenger seat.

Hannibal stepped back, jaw working in frustration. There was still so much that he wished to say – and much still to resolve between them – but somehow they had run out of time.

Mr Crawford gathered the reins and Will turned again to Hannibal.

'Goodbye.' His expression was openly affectionate and more than a little wistful. 'I hope that we shall meet again very soon.'

For one reckless moment, Hannibal contemplated hauling Will down and dragging him back to the hunting tower, propriety be damned. But he only nodded, gaze steady on the boy he loved so entirely, a promise in his smile that was for Will alone.

‘You may depend upon it.’

# Ruin and Disgrace

The following morning, the Derbyshire tour recommenced. Trips to Ashbourne and Dovedale were arranged for Wednesday and Thursday, but by tacit agreement Friday was kept vacant. Will had intimated that an invitation to dine at Ravenstag might be forthcoming; and when by Thursday evening no note had been delivered, he was convinced that Hannibal intended to issue the invitation in person.

He awoke early on Friday in a state of excited agitation, dressing quickly in front of a mirror which framed a young man with high spots of colour on both cheeks and glittering eyes. After such intimacy as they had shared, being parted from Hannibal for even two days had been a trial. Will had felt it keenly, and he was resolved to confess his feelings to Hannibal at the first possible opportunity. So much had changed between them since that terrible day in Kent, not least Will's perception of the man he now knew had captured his heart utterly. And it was a constant source of anxiety to think that Hannibal might not realise the full extent of Will's regard.

An unexpected diversion arrived just after breakfast in the form of two letters from Alana. Evidently one had been at first misdirected; probably, Will noted with fond amusement, as a consequence of Alana's terrible penmanship. The party had been on the point of setting out on an excursion to the church, to take their fill of its ancient architecture and views over the Derbyshire countryside, but Mr and Mrs Crawford offered immediately to leave Will to enjoy his correspondence. He accepted without demur, not least because such a plan ensured that he would not miss Hannibal, should he call. And so the Crawfords sallied forth without him, and Will settled in to read.

The first letter had been written five days since, and was for the first page and a half a light-hearted commentary on the minutiae of village life over the past few weeks. But the latter half, which was dated a day later and written in unmistakable agitation, was of decidedly greater import. It was to this effect:

*Since writing the above, dearest Will, something has occurred of a most unexpected and serious nature. Do not be alarmed – we are all well. What I have to say relates to Abigail. An express came at twelve last night, just as we were all gone to bed, from Colonel Chilton, to inform us that Abigail had left Brighton and had gone up to Scotland – to Gretna Green – with one of the officers. Oh, Will – she has run off with Mr Brown! You may imagine our feelings. To Freddie, however, it does not seem to have been so wholly unexpected.*

*I am very, very sorry. So imprudent a match on both sides! All other considerations apart, I have long thought Abigail far too headstrong and wilful to match happily with a fellow Alpha. And with such an Alpha as you and I know Mr Brown to be – well. All that we can do now is hope for the best. He must know that there is no monetary gain to be made from this. I am only thankful that Father and Mama do not know the truth of Mr Brown's past. Let us hope that when I write again, it will be with news of their marriage.*

*Alana.*

Numb with shock, Will dropped the first letter and seized the second. Tearing it open, he began reading with trembling impatience:

*Dearest Will,*

*I hardly know how to tell you what I must, but since writing yesterday I fear I have only bad news to impart. Imprudent as a marriage between Mr Brown and Abigail would be, we now fear that it has not taken place. It seems that before their departure, Mr Brown intimated to Mr Randall that he had no intention of marrying Abigail – that his interest in her was of a far baser nature. When informed of this, Colonel Chilton set off at once from Brighton to trace their route. He succeeded as far as Clapham, but knows only that from there they took the London road.*

*Father is going to London this very day with Colonel Chilton to attempt to trace them, but the colonel's obligations require his return to Brighton tomorrow evening. I beg you all, therefore, to*

*return to Hertfordshire as soon as possible, that our uncle may assist Father in his search. And perhaps Aunt Crawford might be better able than we to offer assistance to Mama, for she keeps to her room and will not be comforted. Fredricka is in disgrace for having concealed the match, and Molly only makes Mama worse with solemn prophecies of doom and an insistence on parading around the house reading aloud select passages from Sermons to Young Women.*

*Do please come home, my dear brother. Never have we needed you more.*

*Your loving sister,*

*Alana.*

Hardly aware of his actions, Will started from his chair and paced to the window, dragging his hands down his face, sickness rising. How could this have happened? The enormity of it – the ramifications for Abigail and for their family – were too terrible to contemplate. And then... there was Hannibal.

Hannibal, who had warned him of Mr Brown's unsteady character as far back as the Muskrat Ball. Hannibal, whose own beloved sister had fallen prey to the man Will had boasted of and defended for so many months.

*'She was not my child, but she was my charge... I kept her close to me, wishing only to protect her in her fragile state.'*

And now Mischa Lecter would once again be exposed to malicious gossip in connection with the rogue Alpha who had almost been her ruination. And who was now, almost certainly, Abigail's.

Will dropped onto the window seat and buried his head in his hands. Why had not he exposed Mr Brown when he had had the chance? Now Abigail was lost, and all Hannibal's reservations about forming a connection with the Graham family were about to be proven horribly justified.

*How he will hate me.*

There was only one thing to do – find the Crawfords and make immediate plans to return to Hertfordshire. Impetuously he jumped up, but as he reached the door it was opened by a servant, and Hannibal appeared. His smile of greeting – the same warm, intimate smile with which he had left Will the previous evening – faded as their eyes met. And Will, painfully conscious that in all likelihood, after *this* day, Hannibal would never again look at him in such a way, said in a voice trembling with emotion, 'Forgive me but I must find my uncle and aunt this instant.'

'Will? Good gods, what is the matter?'

Striding forward, Hannibal made as if to grasp his hands, but Will shied away.

'It cannot wait.'

A flicker of hurt crossed Hannibal's features, but it was quickly schooled.

'Of course. But let me or the servant go after Mr and Mrs Crawford. You are not well.'

Will hesitated, but he recognised the sense of Hannibal's words and nodded, retreating to the window seat to sink down again in utter misery as Hannibal recalled the servant and instructed him to find the Crawfords with all due haste. That done, he closed the door, removed his hat and placed

it on the table, then made straight for Will, kneeling before him to cup his face between warm palms.

‘Will,’ he murmured, the tenderness in his eyes almost too much to bear. ‘My Will. Tell me.’

Will took one shuddering breath and then another, inhaling Hannibal’s beloved scent. ‘Kiss me,’ he begged. ‘Please, just –‘

In the next instant, Hannibal’s lips were pressed to his, and soon they were kissing with ravenous hunger. Will slid his arms around Hannibal’s neck and opened his mouth beneath his lover’s, greedy to taste and savour while still he could. Only when Hannibal made a noise of concern and broke off to stroke his thumbs across Will’s cheeks did he realise that he was crying soundlessly.

‘Please, Will.’ Gentle, cajoling, brow creased with worry. ‘I cannot bear to see you so. What has happened?’

*Tell him*, hissed his inner voice. *Tell him before he learns it from some other source.*

‘I have had a letter from Alana,’ he blurted, ‘with news that I can hardly fathom.’

He disengaged from Hannibal’s embrace and stood up, Hannibal immediately following suit. Will brushed past him and paced the length of the room, in an agony of indecision. How to tell what surely he must? But in the end, the realisation that his aunt and uncle would likely be returning at any moment forced the words from him like bitterest gall, and at the door he turned.

‘My youngest sister has left all her friends – has eloped – has thrown herself into the power of – of Mr Brown.’

Hannibal flinched as if struck, and the colour drained from his face.

Heart aching, weighed down by a dreadful sense of impending loss, Will continued dully, ‘They are gone off together from Brighton. *You* know him too well to doubt the rest. Abigail has no money, no connections, nothing that can tempt him to marry her – she is lost forever.’

‘Is it absolutely certain?’

No warmth now in Hannibal’s voice, no tenderness remaining. Only a clipped sharpness demanding answers.

‘They left Brighton together on Sunday night and were traced almost to London, but not beyond; they are certainly not gone to Scotland.’

Hannibal’s eyes narrowed, expression now stone cold. ‘And what has been done? What has been attempted to recover her?’

Will sighed. ‘My father is gone to London, and Alana has begged my uncle’s immediate assistance. But nothing can be done, I know that very well. How is such a man to be worked on? How are they even to be discovered? I have not the smallest hope.’ Agitation growing, he slammed his fist against the door, causing the wood to judder beneath the force. ‘I could have prevented this. I *knew* what he was! Had his true character been exposed, this could not have happened.’

To this Hannibal made no answer. Brows knit together, he stood in brooding silence, and Will waited with head bowed for the inevitable blow. When it came, the accompanying pain was so

sharp it stole his breath.

‘I am afraid you have long been desiring my absence. Would that I could – but I will not torment you with vain hopes.’ He cleared his throat. ‘This unfortunate affair will, I fear, prevent my sister’s having the pleasure of seeing you at Ravenstag tonight.’

*Tonight*. What *could* have been. Dinner and music and conversation... Stolen kisses... And a night spent wrapped around each other in Hannibal’s bed. But the invitation, barely extended, had been politely, if expediently, withdrawn. Foolish tears pricked Will’s eyes and he blinked them away. Impossible, surely, to be surprised by this turn. He smiled tightly.

‘Oh, yes. Please apologise for us to Miss Lecter. Try, if you can, to conceal the unhappy truth for as long as possible.’ Bleakly, he added, ‘I know it cannot be long.’

Hannibal nodded, gaze intent and grave, and Will pulled open the door, standing aside for him. For a moment, Hannibal looked as if he would say something else; but he only shook his head, retrieved his hat from the table and walked slowly out. In the doorway he stopped, and fixed Will with a long, serious parting look. And then he was gone, and Will was left to wait for the Crawfords in a state of utter desolation.

Hannibal quitted the room with his stomach turning at the thought of leaving Will in such distress, yet knowing that he had no choice. And with each heavy footstep which removed him further from his beloved, he heard over and over the same condemning words.

*‘Had his true character been exposed, this could not have happened.’*

It was, of course, only right that Will should blame him for this catastrophe – who else should be held responsible, when it was his own misjudged pride which had prevented him from revealing the truth about Matthew Brown to the general populace of Hertfordshire many months ago? Cold trickled down his spine at the thought of young Abigail in the hands of the degenerate Alpha. With no fortune, and little but her youthful charms to recommend her, she certainly presented no inducement to matrimony.

The memory of Will’s kiss provided little solace - he had clearly been in shock and would now, in all likelihood, be regretting that he had momentarily sought comfort with the man who had, however inadvertently, brought about his sister’s ruin.

Hannibal took Firefly’s reins with a distracted murmur of thanks to the groom, and on the long hot ride back to Ravenstag his thoughts dwelt solely on one subject. Back at the house, he strode dishevelled through room after room looking for Margot; and finding her finally in the saloon with Mason and the Cordells, walked across to the sofa where she sat engrossed in a book, plucked it from her fingers and tossed it aside. Ignoring Mason and Mrs Cordell’s outraged clucking, he fixed his dearest friend with desperate eyes.

‘I need your help.’

***

A day and a half on the road saw Will and the Crawfords safely back at Wolf Manor.

‘I have missed you so,’ cried Alana, returning Will’s fierce hug with tears in her eyes. ‘Thank you for coming home.’

‘Of course we came home.’ Glancing at Molly and Fredricka, who stood in subdued silence behind their eldest sister, Will added gently, ‘Whatever happens, we have each other.’

‘Indeed we do.’ With a reassuring smile, Mrs Crawford embraced each of her nieces in turn.

‘And it is very possible that all shall yet be well.’ Mr Crawford came forward, hat and gloves in hand, and lifted an enquiring brow. ‘My sister still resides upstairs, eh?’

‘Yes.’ Alana blushed apologetically. ‘She will be glad to see you though.’

Mrs Graham was unquestionably glad. And tearful. And faint of heart.

‘And I never did trust Mr Brown,’ she declared, casting watery eyes around the small gathering at her bedside. ‘Nor ever did I approve of this whole Brighton scheme. What was Mr Graham thinking, allowing my poor, dear Abigail to go off all alone, like a lamb to the slaughter?’

After ten minutes more of such self-pitying lamentations, Will had had quite enough. He excused himself and tugged Alana out with him, barely saving the expression of his ire for the relative privacy of his room.

‘Lamb to the slaughter!’ he exclaimed incredulously, shutting the door with an emphatic bang. ‘Ever since the Militia were first quartered here, Abigail has had nothing but love, flirtation and officers in her head!’

‘She is very young, Will.’

‘And so we must pay the price for her youthful impetuosity?’

Sighing, Alana held out a folded note.

‘What is that?’

‘Abigail left it for Mrs Chilton. Read it, Will. It might make you feel more charitable towards her.’

‘It is not that I feel *un*charitable,’ he insisted. ‘You know how much I care for her. But Abigail’s actions reflect on us all, Alana. Cannot you see that?’

What they had *already* cost him, he could not yet share with his sister, the pain of his separation from Hannibal still too fresh. Burying his feelings, he took the note and unfolded it with no little trepidation as Alana seated herself on the end of the bed.

‘Colonel Chilton brought it with him from Brighton.’

The note was short and written in Abigail’s distinctive scrawl.

*My dear Jane,*

*You will laugh when you know where I am gone, and I cannot help laughing myself at the thought of your surprise tomorrow morning. I am going to Gretna Green, and if you cannot guess with whom, I shall think you a simpleton, for there is but one man in the world I love, and he is an angel. Do not send word to Wolf Manor, for I wish to surprise Mama when I write to her myself and sign my name Abigail Brown! Doubtless Father will be cross because I am not marrying an Omega, but it simply cannot be helped. I never was destined to be ordinary.*

*What a good joke this will be!*

*Abigail Graham.*

‘A good joke?’ Disgusted, Will threw the note to the floor. ‘How could she be so thoughtless? So selfish?’

‘But at least it shows that she was serious in her intentions,’ commented Alana, retrieving the note and smoothing it out on her lap. ‘She must truly have believed that they were to be married.’

‘I do not doubt it,’ replied Will, and he reached for his sister’s hand. ‘We know better than most how devious Mr Brown can be. But even had she chosen a better suitor, to behave in this self-indulgent way – well, at least this time tomorrow Father will have our uncle’s assistance in finding her.’

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But almost an entire week passed without any word, either from the Crawfords or Mr Graham. The one letter they did receive was from Mr Franklyn, who had evidently been informed of the family’s trouble by Lady Price. His resulting long missive provided a certain grim entertainment; and although Will and Alana vowed to keep its contents from their mother, Will bookmarked certain passages and took to reading them at night as a ruthless antidote to his endless pining.

*You are grievously to be pitied, in which opinion I am joined by Lady Bedelia, to whom I have related the entire affair…*
*As Lady Bedelia says, this false step in an Alpha pup must surely proceed from the licentiousness of her father…*
*The death of your daughter would have been a blessing in comparison of this. For who, as Lady Bedelia herself condescendingly says, will connect themselves with such a family?*

*There. His aunt knows. All is now unquestionably at an end between us.*

When finally Mr Crawford wrote, it was only to inform them that there was no news of Mr Brown and Abigail, and that Mr Graham would be returning to Wolf Manor the following day.

‘But then who will fight Mr Brown and make him marry Abigail?’ was Mrs Graham’s wailed response.

***

Upon Mr Graham’s arrival home, he greeted Will with a warm embrace and bestowed smiles of varying degrees of warmth upon his daughters, but otherwise said nothing of the reason for his absence. Not until afternoon tea did any of them venture to speak of it, and it was Will who finally plucked up the courage.

‘How did you leave our uncle?’

Mr Graham paused in stirring his tea. ‘Weary and vexed, much like myself. However, he is determined to continue his enquiries, and I have granted him leave to pursue the matter in whatever way he sees fit. For myself, I think it a hopeless business. They could not have chosen a better place in which to disappear.’

‘Surely the choice of location was none of Abigail’s making,’ protested Alana.

‘Perhaps not,’ replied Mr Graham archly. ‘But there was at least *one* choice in this sorry business that was *entirely* hers to make. Perhaps,’ he sighed, ‘if she had been better taught...’

‘No. Do not distress yourself in that way.’ Will placed a comforting hand on his father’s shoulder, exchanging worried glances with Alana. ‘Abigail has always been headstrong.’

‘My dear boy, I am not afraid of being overpowered by remorse,’ his father continued, looking up with wry affection and patting Will’s hand. ‘It will pass soon enough. But I am to blame for this and there’s an end.’

‘Do not worry, Father,’ piped up Fredricka, who was busily picking apart one of Abigail’s old bonnets. ‘Abi has always wanted to visit London.’

‘She will be happy, then,’ he commented dryly, and returned to his tea.

***

Two days later, an express arrived from Mr Crawford. Will and Alana found their father pacing in the orchard, the letter clutched in his hand.

‘What does our uncle say?’ asked Will, tensing at Mr Graham’s strained expression. ‘Is not it good news?’

‘Hmph. What of good could possibly come from this situation? But as to the news your uncle has sent –’ Looking as perplexed as Will had ever seen him, Mr Graham held out the letter. ‘Read it for yourself, Will. Read it aloud, for I can hardly make sense of it.’

Will took the letter, and Alana peered over his shoulder as he read.

*‘My dear brother,*

*Soon after you left London, I was fortunate enough to discover in which part of the capital our fugitives had hidden themselves. Shortly thereafter, they were traced and apprehended; and although they are neither married nor even engaged, if you are willing to assure your daughter the settlement previously agreed upon as befitting your Alpha progeny, then the marriage may take place with all due expediency. Mr Brown has some little money, and when all his debts are discharged he will not be in so hopeless a position as at present.*

*If you will send me full powers to act in your name, I will make arrangements for the wedding to take place within a fortnight. Abigail is now in our care and she shall remain with us until this matter is settled.*

*Yours, etc,*

*Jack.’*

‘And they must marry,’ murmured Will, returning the letter to his father. ‘Yet he is such a man.’

‘Yes, they must marry. That is the way of the world, Will, and your sister knew this when she consented to the elopement.’ Mr Graham frowned. ‘But there are two things that I would like very

much to know – how much money your uncle has had to lay down to bring this about, and how I am ever to repay him.'

'What do you mean?' Alana paled. 'You do not think that our *uncle* means to discharge Mr Brown's debts?'

'My dear Alana, of course he does. The salary of a lowly officer allows little enough for squandering.'

Filled with revulsion, Will turned to Mr Graham. 'Then the rumours we have heard of his gaming here in Hertfordshire are true.'

'Here, Brighton, London too, I should not wonder.' Mr Graham smiled grimly. 'What a prize our little Abigail has snared. A fortnight hence, I wager your uncle will be short of pocket by at the least ten thousand pounds.'

It was a sombre party that returned to the house, although they were not left long to their reflections. Mrs Graham's joy at the prospect of her favourite daughter being the first of her children to marry was unconfined, and she arose from her sickbed with admirable alacrity.

'We must send to Paris for her trousseau, and of course they must be married from here. Perhaps, my dear, you could find a house for them close by in which to settle,' she wheedled.

Singularly unimpressed, her husband retorted, 'She shall marry in London, in the clothes her aunt provides for her, whether it be lace or sackcloth. And as for finding them a house, that is done already. Colonel Chilton writes in an accompanying note that he has found Mr Brown a commission in the north – which I presume your brother has paid for – and they are to travel immediately to Newcastle from the church.'

The shrieking and rending of garments which this speech provoked drove all the children promptly into the garden, where they remained for several hours. But for Will, even this was not far enough away; and saddling Winston, he rode out to the pond where first he had met the proud, stern Alpha whose absence he felt every hour like a wound that refused to heal. There he dismounted, stumbling, and fell to his knees, utterly defeated. And there, finally, the hot tears fell, and he cried as he had never in his life cried before.

*Why did not I tell him that I loved him? I should have told him. Hannibal, brother-in-law to Matthew Brown? Never. All is truly lost now.*

***

In the end, a compromise of sorts was reached for the sake of familial harmony. Mr Graham agreed to provide some little money for a wedding outfit from a respectable London fitter, and the Browns were granted permission to pay a visit to Wolf Manor on their way north.

Thus, two weeks to the day of Mr Crawford's letter, the carriage was sent to meet the newlyweds from the public coach, and just before dinner it returned. Abigail's excited chatter could be heard in the vestibule, and when the door to the breakfast room was opened, she ran straight into the waiting arms of her doting mama.

Sauntering in behind her came Mr Brown, looking as nonchalant as Will had ever seen him. He bestowed generous smiles on all, while meeting the gaze of none. Yet for all such bravado, his

pretty mouth had acquired a decidedly sulky dip, and his already pervasive scent was tinged with a sickly note.

At dinner, Will was relieved to find himself seated far from his new brother-in-law. This relief was tempered, however, by his proximity to the giddy, giggling bride.

‘My dear Matthew and I agree on every subject,’ she gushed, biting delicately into a mushroom as she gazed admiringly at him down the length of the table. ‘He says that we are birds of a feather. My little hawk, he calls me.’ She fluttered a wave at him, which was returned by her dear Matthew with only a brief, half-hearted lift of the hand.

‘Hawks are, by their natures, solitary creatures,' Will could not resist pointing out.

Evading Alana’s kick under the table, he eyed his youngest sister with wonder. How could not she see what already was evident to him?

The fullest extent of his sister’s folly became clear over the days that followed. Any natural vivacity that Matthew Brown had once possessed was gone. Any depth of feeling which he might have had for his loquacious bride was singularly lacking. He was trapped in a snare of his own making, and no amount of simpering, smirking flattery could be enough to disguise the vicious resentment lurking in his dark eyes.

But Will could not rejoice in the Alpha’s defeat. The price they had all paid for it had been far too dear. And what Abigail’s punishment would yet prove to be, he could only contemplate with genuine sorrow. His one comfort was the knowledge that she had inherited their mother’s pugnacious wilful ignorance.

***

On the fifth day, the uncommonly fine weather drew the whole family out into the garden; and as Will wandered through the orchard, picking his way between rosy windblown apples, he found himself unexpectedly in the company of his youngest sibling. Evidently she had sought him out, for they had not walked together long before she turned to him with a confidential air.

‘Will, you were not present when I told the others of my wedding. Would you like to hear of it now?’

‘I have no particular objection,’ he replied mildly, though in truth the idea turned his stomach. But in another five days, they would be gone. And in all probability, it would be a long time before he saw Abigail again. ‘Tell me, then.’

She laughed happily and looped her arm through his.

‘Oh, it was such a day! Our aunt sat with me while I dressed, and she talked so seriously! But I heard hardly a word of what she said – all that I could think of was my dear Matthew, and how splendid it would be if he was married in his red coat.’

Swallowing his annoyance, Will asked, ‘And was he?’

‘No,’ she pouted. ‘In truth, it was very dull. Why, even Mr Lecter’s coat was brighter, and he only groomsman!’

‘What did you say?’ Going hot then cold, Will stopped dead and grasped his sister’s arm. ‘Mr Lecter? *Hannibal Lecter* was at your wedding?’

‘Yes, and he was horrible stern! Why, he did not even compliment me on my gown. But, oh!’ Pressing her fingers to her lips, Abigail giggled nervously. ‘I ought not to have said a word about it. It was to be a secret. What will my dear Matthew say?’

Head in a whirl, Will stared at her, a dozen questions perched on the tip of his tongue. Hannibal in London, at Matthew Brown’s side? Acting as *groomsman* at his wedding? After everything that had occurred between them, it was surely impossible!

‘Will?’ Abigail looked at him anxiously. ‘Swear to me that you will not say anything. I would not wish to get into trouble.’

Will allowed the irony of that statement to pass. ‘I will not say a word,’ he promised.

He would, however, write to his aunt; and as soon as he was able, he took himself away to his room and did just that.

*If, my dear aunt, you consider it acceptable to share with me the reason for Mr Lecter’s presence at my sister’s wedding, I would be most grateful to know the particulars. I do not, however, ask you to break any confidences; and if you too believe total secrecy to be necessary, I shall honour that wish and pry no further.*

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When, several days later, Mrs Crawford’s response arrived, the thickness of the envelope was reassurance enough that contained within were all the answers for which Will had hoped. He sought an isolated corner of the garden, and with trembling fingers, unsealed the paper.

*My dear nephew,*

*I have just received your letter, and I must say that both Mr Crawford and myself are exceedingly surprised by it. We had assumed you to be fully aware of all the circumstances, considering your closeness to a certain party...*

*But I must not be coy. I know how you value plain speaking, dearest Will. The fact is, we had thought that Mr Lecter would have written to you himself. Doubtless he has good reason not to have done so – perhaps he meant to relate the story to you in person – but as he has not spoken to us of his intentions one way or another, I feel no compunction to withhold the facts of the case from you now.*

*One week after our return to town, Mr Crawford and I received a visitor. It was, as you must have guessed, Mr Lecter. He had apparently been in London for several days, having left Derbyshire only a day after our own hasty departure. He came to tell us that he had located Abigail and Mr Brown, and that he had seen them both. Before I proceed further, Will, I must add that Mr Lecter has impressed us greatly. His behaviour has been impeccable, his manners open and without ceremony. His motives we believe to be entirely guided by his concern and care for you. Not that he has so much as mentioned your name. He shares, I believe, your stubbornness in keeping such feelings strictly under check! But I digress...*

Blinking back tears, trembling from head to foot, Will turned the page.

*Now I shall know it all.*

# Pretending

If Hannibal had been asked who had been the more surprised to find him on the Crawfords' doorstep, Will's relations or himself, he would have been hard-pressed to determine.

At one time, the mere suggestion that he might be persuaded to involve himself again in Matthew Brown's affairs would have been met with exceedingly short shrift. But this was different. This was about Will. His lover's devastation at the turn of events had been motivation enough for him to

sweep aside all of his prideful reservations. And although Will might never forgive him for the ignominy that had been heaped on his family, still Hannibal had to try to make amends.

'It was Miss Verger who suggested that Mrs Hobbs would be a logical contact for the couple,' he explained, accepting with gratitude a cup of tea from Mrs Crawford's elegant hand.

Dust and grime and smog had seeped into his skin and coated his clothes, the inevitable consequence of walking for days from one grim, industrialised district to another.

'Given her past association with Mr Brown, I am amazed that I did not think of it immediately.'

'Possibly your thoughts were engaged elsewhere.'

The gentleness of Mrs Crawford's smile disarmed him, softening his instinctive indignation at such presumption to mild dismay.

'Possibly. In any case, once I had located Mrs Hobbs' boarding house, it was a simple enough task to establish that Mr Brown had, indeed, made his whereabouts known to her.'

'She gave him up so easily?'

Hannibal shook his head, the very memory distasteful. 'She gave him up for a price.'

'And you went straight to his lodgings?'

'I did. It was not the most salubrious of neighbourhoods and I thought it best to attempt your niece's removal at once.'

'Yet she has not returned with you.'

He paused, considering how much of his interview with Abigail Graham he should reveal. It had been illuminating, certainly, but he little relished the idea of giving pain to these decent people.

*'Miss Graham, I urge you to come away with me now. Allow me, please, to return you to your family. They are naturally most anxious for your safety.'*

*Sitting in the shabby armchair which was the only other piece of furniture in the room other than a small desk and a large, unmade bed, Abigail Graham looked back at him unblinkingly.*

*'Well, they should not be. I am perfectly capable of shifting for myself. Ask Mama! Besides, I am happy here, and I would not leave my dear Matthew for the world.'*

*Standing with arms folded, feeling for once utterly helpless, Hannibal searched the girl's features for any sign of concealed distress and found none.*

*'And the fact that you are living with him, unmarried, does not concern you?'*

*'Oh, la!' she laughed, primly straightening the lace tuck which barely covered the low décolletage of her plain cotton dress. 'We shall be married some time or other, I daresay, and why should it signify when?'*

'I see.' Mrs Crawford's eyes were shadowed by deep disappointment.

Her husband placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. ‘Thank you for being so frank with us, Mr Lecter. You spoke also with Mr Brown, I presume?’

*‘One can only wonder at the hold the Grahams must have over you, Hannibal, that you deign to stoop so low.’*

*Ignoring the Alpha’s posturing, Hannibal pinned him beneath an icy stare.*

*‘Why did you do it? Why run? And why take with you a girl for whom you clearly have little true feeling.’*

*‘True feeling?’ sneered Matthew Brown. ‘What know you of such a thing? You, who have ever scorned the idea of love as mere weakness and folly?’*

*‘You do not know me at all, do you?’ mused Hannibal, entirely unaffected by his childhood companion’s outburst. ‘You never did. What I scorned was that which you have indulged in, tired of and cast off with regularity since even before you came of age. That is not love, Matthew. That is infatuation. It is what I sought to save my sister from. And it is the reason I had hoped to extricate Miss Graham, though I see now that I am too late.’*

*Glancing past Hannibal to the closed door, Matthew lowered his voice to a vicious whisper. ‘Abigail Graham is not the innocent little ingénue you would paint her as. She made the choice to come – practically foisted herself on me, if truth be told.’*

*‘Is that so?’*

*‘Well, it was hardly convenient. I was obliged to leave the regiment on account of some... pressing debts, a situation which I intended to remedy here in town.’*

*‘At the card table, I presume.’ Hannibal regarded Matthew with weary disdain. ‘It seems you never learn.’*

*‘My luck would have turned, I know it,’ he shot back. ‘I would soon have made good my accounts. Instead, I find myself playing the fugitive.’ Sourly, he picked at his fingernails. ‘I admit Miss Graham’s company has proven diverting enough, but marriage? I think not. Her father is not in a position to provide adequate compensation for such loss of freedom.’ His eyes sparkled with malice as he added, ‘Had he been so, I would have bedded and wedded that delicious Omega son of his long ago.’*

*Never in his life had Hannibal struck another being in anger; but as he stood over the felled body of Matthew Brown, nursing throbbing knuckles, he considered with savage satisfaction the therapeutic benefits of such a course.*

*‘It is now your turn to listen, Mr Brown. Were it not for the young lady in the room yonder, I would take great pleasure in thrashing the living daylights out of you and throwing you into the nearest gutter.’*

*‘Is that so?’ Wiping blood from his rapidly swelling lip, the sullen Alpha stared at the floor. ‘Tell me then, what plans do you have in substitution?’*

*Hannibal stepped closer, the toe of his boot inches from that handsome, surly face.*

*‘Oh, nothing that you shall find too onerous. I intend to purchase a suitable commission for you in a regiment far from here – Colonel Chilton will no doubt be able to advise me. I shall discharge your debts. And I shall settle upon Miss Graham the sum of one thousand pounds, in addition to the annuity which I am sure her father will agree to, upon her marriage.’*

*‘So generous, Hannibal. And in my turn?’ Matthew fairly hissed, resentment oozing from every syllable.*

*‘In your turn,’ clipped Hannibal, fixing upon him eyes filled with scorching contempt, ‘you shall agree to be nothing less than a devoted and faithful husband. You shall no longer indulge in gaming. You shall not attend parties without your spouse being present. You shall, in short, be an upstanding and useful member of society for the remainder of your days.’*

*Complexion livid, Matthew scrambled to his feet. ‘And if I should decide to brave your displeasure?’*

*‘I would advise against it,’ replied Hannibal, almost gently. ‘Do not be brave, Matthew. It suits you ill. If you choose to ignore my warnings, injuring Miss Graham – and by extension her family – in the process, then you should know that there is nowhere you could hide that I would not find you. The Lecter reach is long, as you would discover to your cost.’*

*‘Enough.’ The dishevelled, defeated Alpha held up his hands. ‘I understand. And I agree to your terms.’*

*Hannibal nodded, smile grim. ‘I thought that you might.’*

‘Oh yes, I spoke with Mr Brown.’

***

*And so you see, Will, Mr Lecter is responsible for all that has transpired to mend Abigail’s fortune. He insists that it was his mistaken pride that made it possible for Mr Brown to so deceive everyone, and has demanded that Mr Crawford take the credit for bringing about the marriage. This, as you can imagine, has caused your uncle much perturbation; but as I have stated already, your young man is very stubborn and will not be denied!*

*One final word – I hope that you will grant us leave next summer to take a tour all around the park in that charming little curricle. Ravenstag is, you will own, far too large to be explored fully on foot.*

*Your ever loving aunt.*

Will sat for several minutes turning the letter over and over in his hands, staring at the pages. Mrs Crawford’s teasing aside, he scarce knew what to think or how to feel.

Hannibal had pursued Mr Brown and attempted to rescue Abigail. He had arranged their wedding and borne the entirety of the expense himself, to say nothing of the money he had laid down to secure the couple’s future.

*Was all of this for me?*

His heart ached sweetly at the thought, yet doubt crept in as he reminded himself of the loathing with which Hannibal had always spoken of Matthew Brown. How could it be possible that he would willingly attach himself to a family which now included the man he hated most in the world? Will pulled from his pocket Hannibal's letter, unfolding it carefully, the pages now worn and increasingly fragile. Although he knew its contents by heart, he read again the portion pertaining to Mr Brown.

*'I came to the realisation that within Matthew there lurked something vicious and savage – propensities which would have horrified both his father and mine.'*

*'...while I was prepared to risk gossip and innuendo on my own behalf, I could not endure the thought of those closest to me suffering...'*

Hannibal's protectiveness of his loved ones and his legacy was unquestionable; and certainly it was conceivable that he had gone to such lengths in order to right a wrong which, if left unchecked, could have been regarded as a stain on his family's honour. But whatever the case, Hannibal had undoubtedly saved the *Graham* family from ruin, and without any intention of claiming the credit for having so done.

Never had Will been more proud of him. Never had he loved him more desperately.

He was roused from his tumultuous thoughts by the approach of Mr Brown, who picked his way through the long grass with the slightly dismayed air of one far more comfortable on a city street. He eyed the letters in Will's hands with open curiosity, and at once Will folded them up and slipped them into his pocket.

'Do I disturb you, dear brother?' asked Mr Brown with an uneasy smile.

'You do,' replied Will shortly, rising to give a cursory bow. 'But I daresay I shall weather the interruption. We have borne far worse lately.'

Only the slight twitch of an eye betrayed Mr Brown's annoyance. He was otherwise his usual smooth, plausible self as quickly he changed the subject.

'Our uncle and aunt have informed me that you visited Ravenstag on your travels.'

*Our?*

It was now Will's turn to quash feelings of annoyance. For this insufferable man to refer so to the Crawfords...

'We did. It is a beautiful estate.'

Determinedly, he kept the wistfulness from his voice. The memories he cherished of those days were not to be sullied by being shared with such as Matthew Brown.

'I should like to see it again myself,' Mr Brown said pensively, 'yet I fear that the experience would prove overwhelming. You saw old Marlow, I suppose, the housekeeper? She was ever my champion, although I daresay she would have found it too painful to talk of me.'

'As a matter of fact, *Mrs* Marlow did mention you once or twice.'

Will increased his pace, eager to be rid of his companion.

‘Really? What did she say?’

Frowning, Will pretended to think. ‘I believe it was something along the lines of, ‘He is now gone into the army, but I am afraid he has turned out very wild.’’

‘Dear Marlow.’ Mr Brown’s forced laugh was wholly unconvincing. ‘How she does love to tease.’

‘Hm.’

At the door of the house, Will stopped and turned to the red-faced Alpha.

‘Allow me to make something clear, Mr Brown. While it is true that we are now brothers-in-law, we shall *never* be friends.’

‘Oh, come now –‘

Hand raised to silence further protests, Will continued, ‘I shall, of course, treat you with the respect due to my sister’s husband. But that is all.’ And he fixed the Alpha with solemn eyes. ‘For I *know*, you see. I know it all. Who you are and what you have done – to Miss Lecter as well as to my sister.’

‘I see.’ Face tight with anger, Mr Brown glanced down at Will’s pocket. ‘Doubtless *someone* has been spreading lies about me. Well, I am used to that. But to think that *you* would believe such scurrilous –’

‘Mr Brown,’ interrupted Will, smiling and shaking his head, ‘please do not go on. There really is no point in quarrelling about the past. We are, after all, family now. And I believe that we understand each other, do not we?’

‘Of – of course.’

They entered the house with Mr Brown looking as uneasy as Will had ever seen him, and he appeared surprisingly glad to reunite with his affectionate wife in the breakfast room.

*Good then. She can stroke his hair and his ego, and he will appreciate her the more for it because the rest of us will not.*

***

The day of the Browns’ departure arrived, none too soon for most of the household, although Mrs Graham spent a good portion of it wailing over the enforced separation from her favourite child.

‘Write to me very often, Abigail, dear.’

‘As often as I can. But you know,’ she said, smiling coquettishly at her husband, ‘married women have never much time for writing. My sisters and brother may write to me. They will have nothing else to do.’

Mr Brown’s farewells were rather more affectionate. He smiled, looked handsome and said many pretty things. It was all that Will could do not to roll his eyes to the heavens; but for Abigail’s sake he restrained himself, and accepted Mr Brown’s handshake with barely a shudder.

‘What a fellow,’ commented Mr Graham grimly, as the carriage containing the newlyweds departed down the drive. ‘He simpers and smirks and makes love to us all. I defy even Sir James Price himself to produce a more feckless son-in-law.’

And shaking his head, he turned and marched back into the house.

***

Although Mrs Graham’s spirits had been quashed considerably by Abigail’s departure, they received a boost a mere week later by a rumour that was circulating the neighbourhood of the Vergers’ imminent return to Muskrat Hall.

‘They shall be arriving in two days’ time, so the butcher tells me,’ announced Mrs Prurnell to her rapt audience, as she sat amidst the family in the drawing room. ‘For the shooting, you know. And they intend, by all accounts, to stay for several weeks!’

Seated beside his eldest sister, Will sought her hand and squeezed it in sympathy, although he did not look her way until their aunt and mother had left the room.

‘I am perfectly well,’ insisted Alana, as he turned to her with concerned eyes. ‘Truly, Will. I am quite over any feelings I had for Miss Verger. We shall probably not see her in any case, as they come for so short a time.’

‘If Father has his way, we shall not see either of them,’ commented Will, trying valiantly not to think about the possibility of a certain *other* person accompanying the Vergers to Hertfordshire. ‘How many times has he talked of last autumn’s visit to Muskrat Hall as a fool’s errand?’

‘For my part, I care not either way,’ Fredricka said sulkily, slumping back onto the sofa. ‘What are the Vergers next to officers in red coats? I hope the regiment shall be returning soon. It is deadly dull without them.’

Molly, sewing quietly in a corner, sighed. Alana clucked her tongue. Will stared, aghast.

‘Have not you learned *anything* from Abigail’s situation?’

Unblinking and unrepentant, Fredricka stared straight back.

‘Abi has got herself a handsome husband and a household of her own. She has done very well, I should say.’

***

Two days were not sufficient for Will’s dark reflections on the many failings of his family, yet he was forced from his introspections on the second morning by his mother’s piercing shrieks as she stood at the foot of the staircase.

‘Alana! Will! Fredricka! Molly! Come downstairs at once! Hurry!’

‘Good lord,’ muttered Will, buttoning his waistcoat hastily as he met Alana on the landing. ‘Do you think there is a fire?’

‘Under Mama, certainly,’ quipped his sister, and Will shot her an impressed look.

‘Very good. I shall make a social commentator of you yet.’

The two younger girls ran down after them, and all four were shooed into the breakfast room by their mother.

‘Quickly!’ she cried, all a-quiver. ‘Take up your embroidery, your books, your pencils! Miss Verger is coming!’ She bustled to the window. ‘What a fine seat she has. And such an elegant horse! But who is that man with her?’

Alana, seated at the table, took up her sketchpad with resolute calm. Will, unable to be quite so calm, went to the window, saw Miss Verger – and beside her, also on horseback, Hannibal – and promptly sat down on the nearest chair.

‘It is Mr Lecter, Mama.’

He felt Alana’s worried eyes on him, and wished fervently that he had confided in her about *all* that had happened in Derbyshire. But such revelations would have to wait. For now the outer door was opening, and at any moment he would once again be face to face with...

‘Mr Lecter and Miss Verger.’

Grabbing a book from the nearby bookcase, Will opened it with shaking hands and cast his eyes downward. The arrivals were ushered into the room, and Will bit back a whimper as Hannibal’s scent curled sweetly around his senses.

‘Miss Verger, what an honour it is to see you again,’ cried Mrs Graham, hurrying forward to greet her. ‘And Mr Lecter. How, er, good of *you* to come.’

Shame at his mother’s rudeness drove Will finally to look up, and colour flooded his cheeks as his eyes instantly met Hannibal’s. The Alpha’s gaze upon him was steadfast, yet to his frustration Will could not divine the expression in those beautiful golden eyes. Their inscrutability reminded him with a sinking heart of the earliest days of their acquaintance, and with a frown he broke the connection to study instead his sister and Miss Verger.

The latter was being manoeuvred by Mrs Graham – with a distinct lack of subtlety – to sit beside Alana, and the pair looked both pleased and embarrassed by these machinations. Mrs Graham then seated herself on the sofa with her remaining two daughters, and Will was mortified by the realisation that Hannibal had been left to shift for himself.

Mortification was followed swiftly by confusion, as the Alpha eschewed the one remaining chair by the door in favour of coming to stand by Will.

‘How do you do?’

His voice, like rough velvet, shivered through Will. After so long without hearing it, he was greedy for more, and could scarce gather his wits enough to respond.

‘I am well, thank you.’

*In another place, at another time, I would have stretched out my hands and pulled you toward me. I would have pressed my cheek against your stomach and wrapped my arms around your waist. In another place, at another time...*

‘And Mr and Mrs Crawford?’

‘They – are well, too, so I believe.’

*Teasing, teasing man! You would know better than I!*

Hannibal watched Will’s expression change yet again, from wistfulness to irritation, and wished for the half dozenth time that this meeting could have taken place in private. But Margot had asked for his support; and weighed down by the knowledge that he had still to confess his past interference in her affairs, it had not been in his power to refuse her.

‘I am glad, on both counts.’

But his smile was not returned; indeed, Will’s increasing mulishness was reminiscent of their first encounter. Then, as now, he had found the Omega’s intransigence both captivating and infuriating.

*If we were alone, I would kiss the pout from your lips; I would pull you into my arms and whisper in your ear that never again will I leave your side. If we were alone...*

‘It is a long time, Miss Verger, since you went away,’ Miss Graham was saying, though the gentleness of her tone belied reproach.

‘It is, and I am sorry for it. More than you could know.’

Hannibal’s sharp glance encompassed both his friend and Miss Graham, who returned Margot’s affectionate gaze with a warmth he had not previously detected; and which, indeed, he might still have missed, shy and fleeting as it was, if he had not been taught by a certain vociferous Omega that first impressions were not always the safest ground on which to base a judgement.

‘There have been a great many changes in your absence,’ declared Mrs Graham. ‘Miss Price is married and settled. And one of my own daughters, my dearest Abigail. I suppose you have heard of it, for it was in the Times, though it was such a brief announcement – ‘Lately, Mr Matthew Brown to Miss Abigail Graham’ – I wonder at my brother-in-law’s awkwardness in drawing it up! Did you happen to see it?’

‘I did. And I wish them many congratulations.’

To Margot’s credit, she managed a sincere smile; since discovering the full facts of the case, she had veered between anguish over the help Matthew Brown was to receive at Hannibal’s hands, and gratitude that it would spare her beloved Alana the pain of having a sister irreparably disgraced.

Will, meanwhile, was once more staring down at the book in his hands, face impassive. But the tautness of his features and the stiff set of his shoulders betrayed his misery, and Hannibal once more cursed the circumstances that prevented him from offering comfort and reassurance.

‘They are gone to Newcastle, and Mr Brown is to take up a commission there. Thank heaven he has *some* friends, though perhaps not so many as he deserves.’

Hannibal felt the admonishing weight of Mrs Graham’s stare and bore it philosophically. Those whom he cared for most in the world knew the truth of Matthew Brown’s character, and with that he was content.

It seemed that Will, however, felt differently...

‘It is true that Mr Brown has been most fortunate, Mama,’ he interjected with some warmth. ‘Indeed, a great deal of trouble has been taken to ensure his prosperity, and surely that must be satisfaction enough.’

Mrs Graham glared and the younger Grahams giggled. Hannibal, heart full of pride, turned to the indignant Omega with a tender smile that was, at last, tentatively returned.

It seemed a politic moment to leave, and evidently Margot thought so too, for she rose with unmistakable intent. Mrs Graham immediately followed suit.

‘You must both come to dinner on Tuesday,’ she cooed, following them to the door. ‘And *Mr* Verger, of course. We are expecting a large party and you will all be most welcome.’

Nothing less than a desperate need to seek out Will for a private conference would have induced Hannibal to accept; but as it was, he found himself wishing fervently that the dinner could be that very night.

***

As soon as they were gone, Will urged Alana to join him for a walk in the garden.

‘Now,’ he said, as soon as they were alone, ‘tell me.’

‘What can you mean?’ asked Alana primly. ‘Truly, Will, there is nothing to tell. I am only relieved that this first awkwardness is over. Now Miss Verger and I may meet as common and indifferent acquaintances.’

‘Oh yes, very indifferent!’ With an expressive shake of his head, Will added, ‘Alana, please take care.’

‘Why?’ she exclaimed. ‘Do you think me so very weak as to be in danger now, after all that has happened?’

Tucking his sister’s arm through his, Will said seriously, ‘I think you are in *very* great danger of making Miss Verger as much in love with you as ever.’

‘Oh, you are quite incorrigible. And what of your Mr Lecter?’

Will shot his sister a startled glance. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Will!’ Alana stopped before a bench and sat down, tugging Will after her. ‘That is quite enough pretence. I know that *something* occurred between you when you were in Derbyshire. And from the way he was looking at you just now –’

‘What?’ Will huffed an uneasy laugh. ‘He barely spoke, and he was *looking* at everyone, Alana.’

‘Oh, Will! Dear Will. How can you not see it? The poor man is clearly besotted.’

He hesitated, then gripped his sister’s hand.

‘Alana, there is something which I have wanted to share with you for a long time, but I could never find the right moment. May I tell you now?’

‘Of course.’ Alana’s eyes were softly sympathetic. ‘Whatever it is, you know I will treat it in the strictest confidence.’

And so he told her all – of their meetings at Ravenstag, of his unexpected heat and the care Hannibal had taken of him, of their conversation on that final day in Bakewell, and of Hannibal’s actions in London. The words spilled from him, almost without pause, and the relief of finally uttering them lightened his heart immeasurably.

When he was finished, they sat together in silence.

‘Then he saved Abigail.’

‘Yes.’

‘And helped his greatest adversary to prosperity.’

‘To relative prosperity, yes, he did.’

‘For you, Will.’ Alana turned to him with a dazed expression. ‘He did all of this for *you*.’

‘I – do not know that.’

‘William Graham!’ Grabbing him by the shoulders, eyes sparkling with merriment, Alana demanded, ‘Must I shake the sense back into you?’

At that moment, their mother’s voice rang out across the lawn, and quickly Will sprang up.

‘No time. We are wanted for breakfast.’

But despite his evasiveness, Will knew that he would be counting the hours until the dinner, and Hannibal’s return.

***

Mr Verger was conspicuous by his absence when the evening’s most important guests were announced. The rumour quickly went around that he had been felled by an unlucky shot during the day’s sport; though the truth, as explained by Miss Verger, was more prosaic – her brother had twisted his ankle and had been ordered to rest it.

At least Will *believed* that to have been the explanation – he had been hopelessly distracted at the time by the sight of Hannibal walking through the open doorway. Resplendent in a coat of soft brown velvet, striped neckcloth in various earthy shades, cream waistcoat shot through with gold thread, and snug cream breeches, he had brought with him into the house the warm, rich perfume of early autumn. And all Will had wanted to do was go to him. Be with him. But their most illustrious guest had been pounced on immediately by Sir James and whisked away to the dining room, where he was placed, to Will’s frustration, at the furthest end of the table from his own seat.

Throughout three long courses, Hannibal’s attention was monopolised entirely by Sir James, and as turning away from him would have meant coming face to face with Mrs Graham, who sat immediately to Hannibal’s left at the head of the table, it was perfectly understandable that he gave the affable gentleman his full and undivided attention.

This did not, however, prevent Will from indulging in a great deal of teeth-gnashing. Even the sight of Alana and Miss Verger, sitting side-by-side with every appearance of easy happiness, failed to enliven his spirits.

He saw his father indicate to his mother with a nod that it was time for the ladies to withdraw to the drawing room, and as they rose from their chairs he took the opportunity to slip out. He had no intention of sitting for full another hour being ignored and feeling like a lovesick schoolboy.

In his father's library, Will plucked a book at random and settled into the window seat. But before his eyes could alight on the first page, he was distracted by the lights outside - torches set into the grass verges, a conceit of his mother's meant to emulate those they had seen at Muskrat Hall. The small flames flickering restlessly reminded him of that night so long ago when he had danced with Hannibal, and he lifted a hand to press against the cold pane, tracing the shapes.

In profile, Will looked achingly young. Hannibal paused just inside the doorway, wholly enchanted by the picture his lover presented. Book balanced on his thighs, slender ankles crossed, head resting against the glass as he gazed outside, slender fingers dancing across the glass. The soft glow of candlelight had half-veiled him in shadow, emphasising the long sweep of his lashes and the midnight tint of irrepressible curls clustered about his forehead.

Denied for so long the sweet lilt of Will's voice, the heady fragrance of his scent, Hannibal had felt his sudden absence with a startling degree of discomposure. Back now in Will's sphere, it was unconscionable that they should once more be parted, and he cared not what his port-swilling companions had thought of his sudden departure from the dining table.

'I have something for you.'

The slow turn of the Omega's head suggested that his presence had been noted already. Solemn blue eyes flicked down to the book in his hand, then back up to his face.

'That is kind of you, but we have plenty already.'

Undeterred by the dismissiveness of Will's tone, Hannibal moved further into the room, drawn inexorably towards him. Wanting. Needing. To be close again. To share his thoughts and his feelings. *And his bed.*

'Not this one, I think.'

Will grasped the weighty tome that was cradled in his lap and held it up pointedly.

'I am at present absorbed, as you see.'

Hannibal's lips twitched but he held his countenance.

'I do indeed. Is it very entertaining?'

'Exceedingly.'

'You surprise me.'

'Why?' snapped Will.

Hannibal came nearer still and bent to examine the pages, hands clasped behind his back.

‘*Rules for Behaviour during Meals, by the author of Principles of Politeness*,’ he read slowly, before straightening up. ‘You are to be commended.’

‘Because I find a manual on etiquette diverting?’

Hannibal pretended to consider. ‘That is, of course, wholly admirable. I was referring, however, to the fact that it is upside down.’

Cheeks now a charming shade of pink, Will snapped shut the book, and held out his hand.

‘Very well, if it will put an end to questioning.’

But as he took possession of the small volume, his eyes softened.

‘Oh.’

‘You should feel no obligation to read it. I merely thought –’

‘You remembered.’ Slender fingers brushed the cloth-bound cover with gratifying reverence. ‘*Dreams, Waking Thoughts and Incidents*.’

‘Of course I did.’

Will stilled. ‘Because you always keep your promises?’

‘If at all possible, yes.’

‘If at all possible.’ Will lowered his gaze. ‘I see.’

Huskily, Hannibal commanded, ‘Will, look at me.’

Meeting that beautiful blue gaze was, as ever, a heady experience. And tumbling from Hannibal’s lips came words which he could no longer repress.

‘I came as soon as I could. I have missed you very much. More than I can say.’

Something trembled in the air between them – something precious and all too fragile. Will’s lips parted on a tremulous sigh.

‘I too. Hannibal, I –’

‘There you are, Hannibal!’ At that moment, Margot appeared in the doorway, expression exasperated. ‘The whole party is assembled in the drawing room and –’

She stopped as she saw Will, and coloured.

‘Oh, Mr Graham, I beg your pardon.’

‘Miss Verger.’ Hastily, Will got to his feet, and Hannibal noted with pleasure that the Omega made no effort to put space between them. ‘Please, do not apologise. We are being unconscionably rude.’

‘Well, that is easily remedied.’ Hannibal smiled first at Margot and then at Will, glance lingering. ‘Shall we?’

They walked through to the drawing room, and as they entered, Will slipped the book into his pocket. It was something precious, not to be shared. At least, with anyone other than Hannibal. Hopes revived, he felt again all the delicious agony of expectation. For surely Hannibal had sought him out to confess his involvement in Abigail's rescue, and to put an end once and for all to secrets and pretence. Further than that, Will would not allow himself to imagine, but Hannibal's tender declaration echoed in his heart.

*'I have missed you very much. More than I can say.'*

*Is it truly possible that he loves me still, despite all that has come between us?*

The words of love that had almost spilled from his *own* lips he tucked away, treasured up for another time.

Hannibal's status was such that he was in demand from every quarter. Will followed him with his eyes, envied everyone to whom he spoke, and then was exasperated with himself for his silliness.

*You are no pathetic, dependent Omega, pining for his mate. Why, you are not even bonded!*

Why, then, did he feel as if they *were*? Why this primal tug of jealousy when the Alpha engaged with another in animated discourse; when sensually sculpted lips smiled at another's joke?

Fretful, and annoyed at being such, Will tore his gaze away and sought instead his sister. In pale blue muslin, Alana was a vision of understated beauty. And clearly Miss Verger thought so too. There was a luminosity about her that was most becoming, softening the stateliness of her appearance - gown of rich red velvet, ostrich feathers in her hair. The two of them worlds apart in terms of social standing, yet finding common ground in that most universal of emotions. Their hands brushed occasionally as they sat close together on the sofa, talking and laughing, and their inattentiveness to those around them cheered Will immensely.

Hannibal was by now helping himself to coffee, and Will's heart beat faster as he saw that he had laid out *two* cups, side by side. Sure enough, Hannibal picked up both and carried them across the room, offering one to Will with a soft smile.

'Thank you,' he murmured, breath hitching as their fingers brushed. 'Tell me,' he added hastily, 'is your sister at Ravenstag still?'

'Yes, she will remain there until Christmas. She has missed her friends, and would not be parted from them so soon.'

Recalling the charming Miss LeBeau, Will smiled. 'And Ripper?'

'He came down with me, and is as troublesome as ever.' But a rich chuckle accompanied the words.

The tea things were removed, and the card tables set out; and to Will's intense annoyance, his mother placed Hannibal at a table on the opposite side of the room from his own. Thus divided, further conversation was impossible. Will's only consolation was that Hannibal's eyes were as often turned towards his side of the room as were his towards Hannibal's, with the consequence that both played abysmally.

There was no opportunity for private leave-taking, and the hovering presence of Mrs Graham made all but the most cursory of farewell glances an impossibility.

‘Well, my dears,’ she said, as soon as the family were alone, ‘what say you to that? I think everything has passed off uncommonly well. Dinner was a triumph. Why, even Mr Lecter acknowledged that the partridges were remarkably well done; and I suppose he has two or three French cooks at least! And Alana, I never saw you looking more beautiful. More than a match for Miss Verger, as fine as she was in her Parisian clothes!’ And she winked at the newest apple of her maternal eye. ‘Mark my words, we shall have you at Muskrat Hall yet!’

# Machinations

Halfway through breakfast the following morning, a letter arrived from Ravenstag. Hannibal recognised his sister's hand immediately and frowned as he broke the seal.

'Is anything the matter?' enquired Margot as she poured the tea.

'It is from Mischa.' And, as she looked uncomprehendingly at him, 'I received a letter from her only two days ago.'

‘Perhaps she is tired of her Derbyshire acquaintance and wishes to join us here,’ suggested Mason, wincing as he hobbled across to the serving table for a third helping of sausage. ‘Dear Mischa. We are practically family, after all.’

But Hannibal was barely listening. Grimly, he scanned the letter before reading aloud, ‘*Elizabeth’s mother visited Uncle Robert last week and was alarmed by his pallor and general weakened state since seeing him at the ball last July. He claims to have been suffering from a cold and refuses to summon a physician. Mrs LeBeau suggested that I write to you, that perhaps you might take it upon yourself to visit our stubborn uncle and attempt to ascertain the true state of affairs for yourself*.’

‘Oh, Hannibal!’ Margot set her cup back onto its saucer with a clatter. ‘Of course you must go. Where is your uncle at present?’

‘At the London house.’ Rising, Hannibal folded up the letter. ‘I shall leave within the hour.’

‘What? And miss a day’s sport?’ exclaimed Mr Cordell.

His wife looked a little ashamed of him and busied herself buttering a scone.

‘Hannibal, wait.’

He turned at the door in surprise, to find Margot beside him.

‘May I speak with you for a moment? I shall not keep you long.’

‘Yes, of course.’

They withdrew to the study; and despite Margot’s promise, for some minutes she did no more than look at him and bite her lip.

Hannibal leaned against the desk, arms folded. ‘Come, Margot. Out with it. Although,’ he smiled, ‘I think I can guess the reason for this tête-à-tête.’

‘I think not.’

‘You wish to tell me that you are in love with Miss Graham and intend to propose marriage to her.’

Margot stared at him. ‘I – oh. As a matter of fact, yes.’

It was then that Hannibal realised he could procrastinate no longer. ‘Then before I go,’ he said gravely, ‘there is something which *I* must tell *you*.’

Confessions and apologies did not come easily to him, but Hannibal gave himself no quarter as he laid out the full extent of his past interference in Margot and Miss Graham’s affairs. Expression solemn, Margot listened without interruption. And only when he had finished speaking did she walk up to him and lay a gentle hand on his arm.

‘I know how difficult that was for you to say. And I forgive you, Hannibal.’

He shook his head. ‘You ought not. I do not deserve it.’

‘Who among us does?’ Margot laughed softly. ‘Do you think that I share no blame in this? I allowed my brother and my friend to influence me because it was the easiest course. I knew that

there would be opposition to the match and I had not the courage of my own convictions.'

Hannibal covered her hand with his own. 'You have them now.'

'I do. And,' glancing at him slyly, 'so, I hope, do you.'

'Margot –'

'I know full well why you helped Miss Graham's family,' she insisted stoutly, 'and it was not merely on my account.'

'Hm.'

A grin lit her face. 'Perhaps it could be a double wedding.'

'I think not.' He looked at her for a moment, scandalised, before adding soberly, 'Besides, I am by no means certain that *I* shall be having a wedding of *any* kind.'

***

A few days after the dinner, Miss Verger called again, and alone.

'Mr Lecter sends his regrets; he is at present in London visiting a sick relative,' she said, as she was relieved of her bonnet and coat in the vestibule. 'He has, however, assured me that he will return before the fortnight is up.'

It seemed to Will that this last was directed at him, and he glanced aside in a confusion of warring disappointment and anticipation.

It was soon clear, however, where the chief focus of Miss Verger's attentions lay. Although her manners could not be faulted, and her conversation excluded no one, enough of silent communication passed between Alana and herself to convince Will that at the very least, an official confirmation of their courtship was imminent.

After tea, Mr Graham retired to the library, as was his habit, and Molly went upstairs to practise on her pianoforte. Two obstacles having been thus removed, Mrs Graham sat winking at Fredricka and Will with a mortifying lack of tact, until Will removed himself to the other side of the drawing room on the pretence of searching for a particular book.

When at last Fredricka noticed her mother's frantic gesturing, her response was entirely mischievous. 'What is the matter, Mama? What do you keep winking at me for? What am I to do?'

Will groaned and looked anxiously at Alana, but to his relief she appeared merely amused. Miss Verger, seated by her, seemed also wholly unconcerned, although the same could not be said of the lady of the house.

'Nothing, child! I did not wink at you! Heavens, what a notion!'

Her voice rose several octaves, and the glare she directed at her middle daughter warned of a severe scolding to come. It seemed suddenly to occur to her, however, that here was an opportunity not to be missed, and she sprang to her feet.

'Come, Fredricka, I would speak with you.'

The precocious imp flashed a grin at the three remaining occupants before following her mother out. Will, unsure whether his company was desired or not, busied himself at the bookshelf until the decision was taken out of his hands by the speedy return of Mrs Graham.

‘Will, my dear, I want to speak with you.’

It took only a glance at the couple to see that this turn of events was by no means unwelcome, and Will left the drawing room with a quick step and a light heart.

***

An hour passed before Mrs Graham would allow anyone even to approach the drawing room; but at length, Will managed to evade her and make his way back. On opening the door, he observed Alana and Miss Verger standing together beside the fireplace, hands linked.

‘Oh, pardon me,’ he said, thoroughly delighted and prepared at once to withdraw, but Alana shook her head before whispering something to Miss Verger.

‘Yes, of course.’ And with a brilliant smile, and a final press of hands, Miss Verger hurried away.

The instant that she was gone, Will embraced his sister warmly.

‘At last!’ he exclaimed. ‘I was beginning to fear that I would have to put to use my own sorry skills as a matchmaker. But you have managed the job tolerably well yourself.’

‘Will!’ Alana choked down a laugh. ‘You really are a terrible tease!’

‘You must admit this has been an exceedingly long courtship,’ he continued, unabashed. And then, relenting, ‘But as long as you are happy, that is all that matters.’

‘I am.’ Eyes shining, Alana hugged him tightly again. ‘I really am. Oh, Will, if I could but see *you* as happy!’

‘Well,’ he mused, swallowing down the lump of longing which rose in his throat for Hannibal, ‘perhaps if I have *very* good luck, I may meet with another Mr Franklyn.’

***

The first day of October began unremarkably. Miss Verger called early to surprise Alana with the proposition of an expedition and a picnic, a scheme to which she assented gladly. Molly took up with vigour the practise of her newest instrument, a flute, which promptly drove Mr Graham to retreat to his library and Mrs Graham to bawl at her youngest child that the summer house was a far more suitable venue for such an occupation. Thus, shortly after breakfast, only Will, Mrs Graham and Fredricka were present in the dining room when the sound of a carriage coming up the drive alerted them to the arrival of an unexpected visitor.

Absorbed in fly-tying, Will left it to the others to rush to the window, though his curiosity was piqued by his mother’s exclamation that the chaise and four bore a wholly unfamiliar crest. Conjectures flew left and right between mother and daughter, until the door was thrown open and their visitor entered.

It was Lady Bedelia du Maurier.

She swept into the room trailing clouds of stifling coconut sweetness, acknowledged only Will – and then with a mere lift of an eyebrow – and sat down. In her fine Indian silk and plumed headdress, it struck Will that she resembled an exotic bird of paradise stranded accidentally among sparrows – sharp-eyed, twitchy and resentful.

'I hope you are well, Mr Graham,' she said, in a tone which suggested precisely the opposite. 'That lady, I suppose, is your mother.'

Mrs Graham gaped, Fredricka giggled nervously, and Will narrowed his eyes.

'You suppose correctly.'

Ignoring Fredricka altogether, Lady Bedelia appeared to study the dimensions of the room, and the view outside, for several minutes before pronouncing, 'You have a very small park here. However, I noticed a prettyish kind of little wilderness on one side of your lawn.' And rising, 'Mr Graham, I should be glad to take a turn in it, if you will favour me with your company.'

One thought was uppermost in Will's mind as he accompanied Lady Bedelia outside. *Her nephew is nothing like her. How could I ever have thought it? Here is true Alpha superciliousness.*

They entered the copse of which Lady Bedelia had spoken; and before they had taken many steps, Will found himself addressed thus:

'You can be at no loss, Mr Graham, to understand the reason for my visit.'

'Indeed, you are mistaken, Madam,' he replied, endeavouring for Hannibal's sake to err on the side of politeness. 'I cannot at all account for the – honour – of seeing you here.'

His endeavour had evidently failed, for the lady positively bristled as she turned on him.

'Do not trifle with me, young man. A report of a most alarming nature reached me two days ago. I was told that not only was your eldest sister to be most advantageously married, but that *you* – Mr William Graham – would soon afterwards be united with *my nephew*.' And she drew herself up to her full height, looking down her sharp nose. 'What have you to say to that?'

For an awful moment, Will could think of precisely nothing. He flushed, stared and finally offered, 'Only that perhaps your ladyship might have saved yourself the trouble of coming so far.'

'Because you refute at once such a scandalous rumour?' she pounced.

'Because it is not a subject I wish to discuss.' He folded his arms.

'Then it is true.'

Lady Bedelia paled, and for a moment Will felt almost sorry for her. The moment did not last.

'This is not to be *borne*. I suppose I should not be surprised, however.' And she raked him from head to toe with disdainful eyes. 'Your Omegan arts and allurements have clearly drawn him in to a reckless infatuation. How otherwise could he have put aside all sense of duty and honour?'

Will flushed. 'You would consider the union of a gentleman with a gentleman's son dishonourable?'

‘Oh, come, Mr Graham.’ Lady Bedelia looked at him scornfully. ‘Yes, it is true that you are a gentleman’s son, but who was your *mother*? Who are your uncles and aunts?’

With cold anger, Will replied, ‘Whatever my connections may be, if your nephew does not object to them, they can be nothing to *you*.’

‘Do you deceive yourself so much?’ she sneered. ‘He may hunger for you now, but such base appetites are no foundation for a lasting union.’

‘I see. And does your ladyship speak from experience?’

Lady Bedelia drew in a shocked breath. ‘I came here hoping to find a reasonable young man and instead I am confronted by insolence. I tell you plainly, Mr Graham, that if you insist on carrying on with this foolish plan, you will be censured and despised by everyone connected with my nephew. Your alliance will be a disgrace!’

Forgetting for a moment that no such plan was in existence, Will retorted, ‘These are heavy misfortunes. But the happiness which such a marriage would bring must surely outweigh any external inconveniences.’

‘Reckless child!’ spat Lady Bedelia. ‘And if I tell you that he is engaged already, to *my son*?’

Will’s heart gave a sickening lurch. And yet... ‘If that is the case, then I wonder that you are here at all.’

Lady Bedelia hesitated. ‘The engagement is of a peculiar kind. From their infancy they have been intended for one another.’

‘Mr Lecter hardly strikes me as one to blindly obey the machinations of others,’ he retorted, ashamed that he had allowed Hannibal’s aunt to cast doubt in his mind even for a moment.

Looking fairly beside herself with rage, Lady Bedelia stepped closer, forcing Will to take several steps back from her stifling scent.

‘Unfeeling, selfish boy! Tell me once and for all – *are you engaged to him*?’

In that moment, Will would have given much to have been able to hurl an affirmative at his interrogator. But common sense prevailed and he replied quietly, ‘I am not.’

Visibly relieved, Lady Bedelia pressed, ‘And will you promise me never to enter into such an engagement?’

This, far easier to answer. ‘I will make no promise of the kind.’

The formidable lady gasped, glared and all but gnashed her teeth.

‘Then you are resolved to have him! *You*, with your ignoble background and infamous youngest sister – oh yes, I know it all. Sir James and Lady Price have been good enough to keep me informed of all the goings-on here, despite their daughter’s frankly absurd protestations. Heavens,’ she cried, throwing out her arms in an expansive gesture, ‘are the shades of Ravenstag to be thus polluted?’

It was no surprise to learn that the local gossips had been hard at work. And certainly Beverly was to be credited for attempting to subdue them. But Will had heard enough.

‘Lady Bedelia, as you have now insulted me in every possible method, I must beg to return to the house.’

Bowing stiffly, he walked away. Her Ladyship followed, and he felt the weight of her seething disapproval all the way to the door of the carriage, whereupon she turned on him.

‘And this is your final resolve! Very well. I shall now know how to act. Do not imagine, Mr Graham, that your ambition will *ever* be gratified.’ Mounting the carriage steps, she shunned the offer of his hand and, once seated, bestowed on him one final furious glare. ‘I am most seriously displeased.’

It occurred to Will only after the carriage had pulled away that he had never actually denied a resolution to marry Hannibal, and feeling slightly sick he re-entered the house.

***

‘Will,’ said his father the next morning, as together they left the breakfast room. ‘Come into the library for a moment. I have received a letter this morning that has astonished me greatly.’

Following him, Will was at once on his guard. But his immediate fear, that Lady Bedelia had sought another way to discourage him, was laid to rest when Mr Graham picked up a sheaf of papers lying on his desk and, chortling, said, ‘I did not know that I had *two* children on the brink of matrimony. But according to Mr Franklyn, such is the case.’

‘Mr Franklyn?’ Will sank onto the sofa, half-amused and half-irritated. Was there to be no end to this? ‘What can *he* have to say?’

‘Only that your chosen partner is one of the most illustrious Alphas in the land.’ And Mr Graham winked at him. ‘Mr Lecter, you see is the man! *Mr Lecter*, who had not one good word to say about you through the whole of last winter. Are not you diverted?’

‘Excessively,’ murmured Will, eyeing the letter with some trepidation. ‘What else does he say?’

‘Ah, well, he seeks to caution me against encouraging you, as he has reason to imagine that Mr Lecter’s aunt does not look on the match with a friendly eye!’ Chuckling, Mr Graham skimmed over the remaining papers. ‘Much of the rest is even more nonsensical, as you can imagine. Although he does wish to tell us of his dear Beverly’s situation and the expectation of a young Franklyn olive branch.’

‘Beverly is expecting?’ Lifted momentarily from his gloomy thoughts, Will grinned. ‘I must write to her at once.’

‘Well, when you do, be sure to convey your assurance of the inaccuracy of her husband’s report, lest Lady Bedelia should come charging back here to refuse her consent,’ his father said gleefully. ‘Mr Lecter indeed! His perfect indifference and your pointed dislike make this so delightfully absurd!’

‘Indeed.’

Painful, the necessity to laugh when Will would far rather have cried. And his father's blindness to the truth of the situation filled him with a fear that perhaps, instead of Mr Graham seeing too *little*, Will might perhaps have fancied too *much*.

***

'Really, Hannibal, I thought that *I* was the invalid.'

Startled, Hannibal put down his knife and fork, and frowned at his uncle.

'Whatever do you mean?'

Robert Lecter brandished his spoon at his nephew's half-full plate.

'Well, what do you call this? I swear you have yet to finish a meal since you arrived here.'

'Nonsense.' Hannibal clucked his tongue. 'It is your cook's servings that are inordinately large, that is all. And as for *you* being an invalid, I think we can both agree that this has been the fastest recovery in history. Really, Uncle,' shaking his head, 'if you wanted company, you had only to ask. You know that you are welcome in Derbyshire and Hertfordshire both!'

'I do not know what you mean.' His uncle's face was the picture of innocence. 'Although if I did, I would have to say that, dear Margot's company notwithstanding, the idea of spending any length of time with that appalling brother of hers is not to be borne.'

'Hm.'

At that moment, a flurry of activity in the outer hall diverted the attentions of both, and in the next moment they rose hastily from their chairs as through the dining room doorway walked Lady Bedelia, face set in a mask of displeasure.

'Hannibal, I must speak with you this instant.'

'Good morning, Aunt,' he replied dryly. 'I trust that you are well. Now do you see, Uncle, that spreading false reports of your imminent demise is perhaps not the best way to invite guests?'

'Hmph.'

'Oh, that.' Lady Bedelia waved her hand dismissively. 'I took no note of that. Robert, I see that you are as impossible as always.'

'Bedelia,' he returned, not one bit abashed, 'I see that *you* are as *cheerless* as always.'

'It is of a false report of another kind that I wish to speak,' she snapped, sparing him a single withering glare before turning again to Hannibal. 'I would have you know, Hannibal, that there is a most scurrilous rumour abroad about you – a rumour which, I believe, has been industriously circulated by certain persons known to all present.'

'A rumour, eh? And a scurrilous one at that! Well done, my boy.'

Hannibal cast his uncle an impatient glance. 'Uncle, please. Aunt Bedelia, do sit down.'

He drew out a chair and after a pause she seated herself, back ramrod straight, still the picture of indignation.

‘Now tell me. What is this rumour?’

‘That you, *my nephew*, Mr Hannibal Lecter of Ravenstag House, are engaged to be married to Mr William Graham, that upstart Omega of ignoble birth from Hertfordshire.’

So taken aback was he that it took Hannibal several moments to register the less-than-flattering description of Will.

‘Aunt,’ he snapped. ‘I would ask you to modify your language when you speak of my – of Mr Graham.’

‘I am sorry,’ she sighed, pressing a hand lightly to her forehead. ‘Perhaps that was indelicate of me. But you must know that this dreadful rumour will only gain credence as long as he refuses to deny it!’

‘What do you mean?’ Hannibal stiffened. ‘Aunt, please tell me that you have not confronted Mr Graham about this.’

‘Of course I have!’

‘That is totally unacceptable!’

Half-rising from his seat, protective Alpha instincts surfacing strongly, he was stopped by his uncle, who motioned for him to retake his seat.

‘Bedelia, do you mean to say that the young man claims to be engaged to Hannibal?’

‘Well, no,’ she admitted, looking haughtily from one to the other, ‘but neither would he give me any assurance that such an idea was beyond his province!’

‘He would not?’

How quickly Hannibal’s anger drained away upon hearing those words.

‘Indeed he would not!’ she asserted strongly. ‘In fact, he had the temerity to lecture me – *me* – on terms of equality between gentlemen. And he flatly *refused* to discount the possibility of entering into a future engagement with you! Can you imagine?’

Hannibal certainly could, and he could no more prevent the smile that spread across his face than he could stop the sun from rising.

‘Thank you, Aunt Bedelia.’ He took her hand and kissed the back of it. ‘I am eternally indebted to you.’

‘But of course, dearest Hannibal,’ she exclaimed, softening immediately.

Standing, Hannibal straightened his coat. ‘And now, if you will both excuse me, I must return to Hertfordshire this instant.’

His uncle grinned. ‘About time, my boy. About time! I wager you have got your appetite back now, eh?’

‘Robert? What can you mean?’ Lady Bedelia stared, first at him and then at Hannibal. ‘Hannibal?’

But Hannibal was already striding towards the door.

‘Goodbye, Aunt Bedelia. Uncle, I shall see you again soon.’

‘At the wedding, I should not wonder,’ his uncle called after him. ‘I look forward to receiving my invitation very soon!’

‘Of which wedding do you speak?’ Lady Bedelia’s voice grew shriller by the moment. ‘Robert? *Which wedding*?’

The last thing Hannibal heard before hurrying upstairs to instruct his valet and summon the carriage was his uncle’s laughter ringing merrily through the house.

***

The Graham household was by now accustomed to receiving morning calls from the lady of Muskrat Hall; and so when Miss Verger was announced, and Mrs Graham immediately set to fussing over Alana’s hair, Will continued reading his book.

‘And Mr Lecter.’

He started, looked up, and their eyes instantly met. Impossible not to recall Lady Bedelia’s warnings, and Will blushed, not least at the thought that his mother might mention their illustrious visitor. Anticipating an agony of embarrassment, he looked quickly away again. Happily, however, Miss Verger managed to get in the first word.

‘Good morning, Mrs Graham. It is such a beautiful day, I should like to propose an expedition. Perhaps a walk across the fields to Muskrat Hall?’

Mrs Graham blanched visibly at the idea of doing any such thing.

‘Oh, my dear, I fear my walking days are over. But by all means take the children.’

‘I must practise for my recital at Sir James’,’ protested Molly.

‘And I have promised to call on Brian – that is, Mr Price,’ amended Fredricka hastily. ‘He took away my pens last week to mend them, and I cannot write my journal without them.’

‘Oh, you and your scribblings,’ sniffed Mrs Graham. ‘Very well, then. I fear, Miss Verger, that you shall have to make do with only Alana and Will for company this morning.’

Miss Verger only smiled. ‘Company which we should be very glad to have, should not we, Hannibal?’

‘Indeed we should.’

The warmth of Hannibal’s tone drew Will’s gaze back to him. He was at that moment looking at Miss Verger, and Will took the opportunity to admire the very fine figure his lover cut in his coat of

olive green, high-crowned hat held between gloved hands. Every inch the aristocratic Alpha. Yet Will knew the man beneath the trappings; his scent, his taste, the smooth planes of his body, the delicious roughness of hair beneath his palms. Knew him and ached for him, as he ached still at the memory of the beautiful interlude they had shared at Ravenstag, where for a few sweet days they had existed in their own private world when all things had seemed possible.

'Will?' Alana was looking at him with enquiring eagerness. 'What say you?'

A resolution forming in his mind, Will flashed a grin at his sister. 'Why not? It is, as Miss Verger says, a lovely day.'

He avoided looking at Hannibal as they all set out together, allowing Alana and Miss Verger to fill the silence with talk of the upcoming party at Sir James's. Hannibal was equally quiet, and it was not until they had been walking for some time, Wolf Manor far from their sight, Alana and Miss Verger lagging behind, that Will drew a deep breath and began.

'Hannibal, there is something that I have wished for some time to say to you.' He flicked a glance sideways; and satisfied that he had Hannibal's full attention, ploughed on. 'I want to thank you, most sincerely, for what you did for Abigail. I know it all, as does Alana, and I cannot tell you how grateful we are. It is a debt that can never be repaid.'

There was a long silence, at the end of which Hannibal replied, in a tone rather less than tranquil, 'I am sorry. I did not think that Mrs Crawford was so little to be trusted.'

'I beg your pardon?' Will stopped and stared at him. 'You would blame my aunt for telling me? Why? Because you would rather have told me yourself?'

'Because it is not something I intended you *ever* to know,' replied Hannibal stiffly. 'It was a situation of my making, and I alone was responsible for its solution.'

In that moment, Will could happily have kicked him in his aristocratic shins.

'You would really not have told me?'

'I would not.'

Mouth firmed, Hannibal set off walking again; and Will, aware of Alana and Miss Verger closing behind them, fell into step beside him.

'It was not my aunt's fault – Abigail let slip your involvement in the wedding and I pursued the matter.' He huffed a harsh laugh. 'My aunt was, I think, surprised that I did not already know.'

He felt Hannibal's eyes on him.

'You are angry.'

'I am singularly angry.'

'It is not good to see me, then?'

Will ground his teeth. 'Good? At this particular moment, no.'

'May I ask why?'

Will spread his hands in a gesture of utter frustration.

‘Why do you think? Because in Bakewell you walked away without a word. Because you planned all of this and communicated none of it to me, not even when you came back. Because you allowed me to believe that you had *abandoned* me. That I no longer meant anything to you.’

‘I did no such thing!’ Sounding highly affronted, Hannibal jammed his hat back onto his head and strode on. ‘I told you how much I had missed you!’

‘I am not some weak little Omegan doll to be soothed and pacified,’ snapped Will, easily keeping pace with him. ‘I will not live my life being fed half-truths and platitudes.’

‘Being –’ Hannibal’s breath hissed between his teeth. ‘Well, Mr Graham, if that is truly what you think of me then perhaps you would rather not keep company with me any longer.’

A knot of dread twisted in Will’s stomach, even as he replied with bitter emphasis, ‘Oh, most *assuredly* not, Mr Lecter.’

Turning on his heel, he stalked back in the direction of the house, passing Alana and Miss Verger with barely an acknowledgement of the concerned-looking couple. And several times on the way home he stumbled, as tears filled his eyes and spilled hotly down his cheeks.

# Reuniting

Chapter Notes

At the end of this chapter, you will find wonderful art created by the lovely thatthreetoedsloth. Please pop on over to tumblr and give them some love!

‘Tell me again why we must attend this tedious country gathering,’ grumbled Mason, as the carriage bumped along the driveway leading up to Price Lodge.

‘Now, Mason,’ tutted Margot, smoothing out the folds of her cream muslin gown. ‘You know very well why. The Prices are intimate acquaintances of Alana’s family, and it was very good of them to invite us. If only Hannibal would stop frowning, I am sure we would all have a most enjoyable evening.’

‘I fail to understand why *I* am here at all,’ snapped Hannibal, a little more loudly than he had intended.

Mrs Cordell shot him a startled look, and Mr Cordell jerked awake with a muttered exclamation.

‘You are here to support me,’ replied Margot sweetly, although her eyes glittered with determination. ‘As you promised.’

As he had promised. But after three days and nights of agitation and sleeplessness, Hannibal was almightily tempted to say the devil with promises.

Three days. Of replaying over and over Will’s accusing words: *‘I am not some weak little Omegan doll to be soothed and pacified. I will not live my life being fed half truths and platitudes.’*

Lingering hurt and anger mingled now with self-doubt. Had he really treated Will so? Margot had been blunt on the subject when she had finally prised from him the details of their last conversation.

*‘You love fiercely, Hannibal, and you are used to protecting those you love. But marriage is about partnership. Will Graham is your equal, and if you wish to marry him then you must be prepared to share with him* every *aspect of your life, for good and ill.’*

He was still mulling this over as they were shown through to the drawing room, where the carpet had been rolled back and a vigorous dance was taking place.

‘Welcome, welcome!’ Sir James was upon them in an instant, all smiles and vigorous handshakes. ‘Please, do partake of a cup of rum punch.’

‘Just one?’ muttered Mason.

But luckily, Sir James had moved on to greet the next batch of guests.

Hannibal had not taken many steps into the room before he sensed Will’s presence. The boy’s scent rose above all others, sweeter than ever; and forgetting instantly that he had vowed to ignore the Omega, should their paths happen to cross, he looked about him with a hunger he could not contain.

It was a large gathering, and typically raucous, a cacophony of lively chatter clashing with the vibrant notes of a Scotch reel. Hannibal scanned the line of dancers, and his breath caught as he spied Will, whirling and grinning, at the furthest end. He did not recognise the gentleman with whom Will was dancing, but his ire rose at once. Here *he* was, agonising still over the fractious manner of their parting, while it appeared that Will was entirely unaffected.

He debated whether to turn around and leave, promises be damned. But in the next moment, the reel ended, and the trio of musicians struck up the unmistakable strains of a *waltz*.

At once, a hushed murmur ran through the guests. Several of the older partners left the dance at once, some shooting disapproving looks at Sir James, who appeared to be enjoying the reactions to such a controversial choice. Their ranks were quickly filled by a merry group of younger people, and Hannibal smiled as he watched Margot approach Miss Graham, happiness radiating from both as they took their places in the set. But his smile faded when he saw that Will was still in the company of the attractive gentleman who had partnered him in the reel.

Will heaved an inward sigh as he contemplated yet another half hour of utter boredom. Why, he could not even recall the Alpha's name, yet here he was stranded with the tedious man! It was all Beverly's fault.

*'You simply must come, Will. For once I enter my confinement it will be impossible for me to attend such gatherings, and then I will hardly see you for the longest time!'*

And so he had come, and been thoroughly miserable for the first hour. Until, exasperated beyond measure, Beverly had introduced him to Mr Whatever-his-name-was from such-and-such a place. Reluctant to socialise, yet living in fear of Hannibal's imminent arrival and anxious to be occupied when it occurred, Will had accepted with reluctance the man's mumbled invitation to dance, fixed a determined smile upon his face and entered the fray.

He was contemplating refusing the Alpha's hand for this second dance when a very familiar scent pulled from him a tiny whimper; and in equal parts dread and delight, he looked around to find Hannibal stalking towards them, face grimly set.

Will adopted his most truculent air as Hannibal stopped in front of them, bowed peremptorily and, narrowed golden eyes fixed squarely on Will, said shortly, 'I believe this is my dance.'

As annoyed as Will still was, this open show of possessiveness tugged at his heart, and he found himself throwing to his bemused former partner a half-hearted apology. Still, as the crestfallen man shuffled away, Will waited several more moments before accepting the hand of his infuriating Alpha with the tiniest of smirks.

Nevertheless, his first words as they joined the set were sharp and to the point.

'You are an ass.'

Hannibal looked back at him with hauteur.

'Because I claim the right to dance with you?'

His raised hand closed around Will's, the other settling on his waist, and Will's breath hitched as he was pulled closer. The sweet, plaintive melody of the Sussex Waltz filled the air, the world shrinking to just the two of them, and as they moved in time together he had to focus on breathing. Every brush of their thighs sparked through him, and his fingers tightened on Hannibal's shoulder.

'Because you are, as always, unconscionably high-handed.'

Hannibal regarded him broodingly. 'I suppose that you require an apology.'

‘Not if you do not mean it,’ Will flashed back.

A crease appeared between Hannibal’s brows. ‘Never have I considered you weak. Or a doll. In fact, I have never known anyone *less* doll-like. Your hair is untameable, your complexion is not pale enough to be considered fashionable, and you roam habitually about the countryside half-dressed.’

Indignation rising, Will began to pull away, only for the air to leave his lungs in a great whoosh as Hannibal tugged him back and whispered against his temple, ‘You are, however, entirely beautiful, Will Graham. And I will not apologise for thinking *that*.’

Will missed a step, stumbled against the Alpha’s lean body and clutched on more tightly.

‘Do not say such things when I am endeavouring to concentrate,’ he hissed. ‘Besides, it is your insistence on keeping secrets that I chiefly object to. Manipulations, however benign, are manipulations still.’

‘A fair point.’

Will leaned back, eyeing Hannibal suspiciously.

‘Then you admit that you were in the wrong?’

A slight inclination of the head signalled assent. ‘Though my intentions were entirely honourable.’

‘I know that, Hannibal.’

‘Then we are friends again?’

*Friends*. Ignoring the ache in his chest, Will ventured a smile. Still...

‘No more secrets,’ he warned. ‘We have to be on equal terms, Hannibal.’

‘You have my word.’

There was no triumph in Hannibal’s voice, only a husky relief that Will felt as if it was his own.

‘Then yes, we are friends again.’

They danced on. But the longer they danced, the more that insidious ache grew. Was this, then, to be their end? Friendship with Hannibal Lecter was, admittedly, no small thing. But after all they had shared, could it ever be enough?

‘You dance with natural grace. Have ever I told you that?’

Will laughed a trifle breathlessly as he was swung into a series of turns.

‘I believe that the last time we *talked* of dancing, it was to declare that neither of us found it interesting.’

‘It was *you* who said that,’ Hannibal reminded him, a glint of humour in his eyes. ‘I merely agreed with you.’

‘A rare occasion.’

‘In the earliest days of our acquaintance, certainly. But I hope not now.’

A new hope trembled between them. Hannibal felt its tentative grasp as something infinitely precious; and when the gong sounded for dinner and couples began drifting from the floor, his hand lingered on Will’s waist.

‘We never did have our outing the other day. I should like to remedy that.’

Will’s expression was cautious but by no means discouraging.

‘What do you propose?’

‘What say you to an angling expedition?’

The raised brows which this statement prompted roused no little irritation, as did Will’s amused exclamation.

‘Angling? *You*?’

‘I have been known to indulge in the sport on occasion,’ replied Hannibal, adding dryly, ‘I do not keep the lakes at Ravenstag well stocked merely for show. And it is an opportune time for carp fishing, is not it?’

‘Well, yes.’

‘Then I shall call for you at first light tomorrow. If, that is, you have no other engagements.’

‘At first light? No, I have no other engagements.’

Will smiled properly then, a light-hearted grin that lit up his eyes and made Hannibal wish fervently that morning would arrive with all possible speed.

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At dinner, to Hannibal’s gratification, they were seated directly opposite each other; and all through the soup course, which was conducted in relative silence, he took the opportunity to study covertly the face and form of his beloved. What made Will the more beautiful? he pondered. Those dark-fringed eyes of ever-changing shades of blue, or the intelligence that sparked therein? The sensuous bow of a mouth that no artifice of shade could ever hope to emulate, or the wry quirk that so often curved it? The coal-black sheen of thick curls that he had seen many a woman cast envious glances at, or their habitual careless rumpling?

It was a question that he could have dwelt happily on for hours, but inevitably the presence of other people soon proved irksomely distracting. After the soup dishes were cleared, Mr Franklyn leaned across the table to help himself to partridge and gestured at Will with his spoon.

‘Tell me, dear cousin, when will you be joining your uncle’s practice in London?’

It could have been Hannibal’s imagination, but he fancied that Will flicked a glance his way before turning his attention to his cousin.

‘Mr and Mrs Crawford will be spending Christmas with us at Wolf Manor, and I shall accompany them back to London afterwards.’

‘I imagine that you are looking forward to beginning work. It is a very good thing for a young man to have active employment.’ Mr Franklyn smiled benignly. ‘And, of course, being unencumbered by attachments, you shall be able to devote yourself wholeheartedly to your occupation.’

Clearly his aunt had wasted no time before deploying her envoy, thought Hannibal with grim amusement. *Mrs* Franklyn, seated on Will’s right, looked anything *but* amused.

*‘My dear,’ she said, in tones which brooked no opposition, ‘I am sure you will agree that business hardly precludes* matrimony!’

Mr Franklyn’s face was suddenly a picture of mortification. Perhaps, after all, his wife’s opinion was of at least equal import as that of his formidable patroness.

‘Oh, dearest, of course not! Cousin Will, I hope sincerely that I have not offended you.’

‘Not at all, Mr Franklyn. Please, do not give it another thought.’

Yet for all his words of reassurance, Will looked hardly less embarrassed; and although he darted a grateful sideways look at his friend, he thereafter kept his eyes fixed steadfastly on the contents of his plate.

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‘Well, gentlemen,’ announced Lady Price, as at length the last of the dessert dishes was removed, ‘we shall leave you to your port.’

‘Ah, yes,’ beamed Mr Franklyn. ‘Although, of course, we shall not neglect you dear ladies for long.’

‘Oh, I daresay we shall bear the loss for an hour or so,’ remarked his wife, although she smiled at him fondly enough.

‘A few hands of vingt-un will help pass the time,’ added Margot mischievously.

This raised at last a smile from Will. ‘I think, on reflection, I prefer *your* choice of entertainment, Miss Verger.’

Hannibal stiffened. Of course, as an Omega, Will was free to choose - an enviable position, for sure - but if it meant that once again he was running away...

‘Although,’ continued Will, eyes sliding in Hannibal’s direction almost as if he had read his thoughts, ‘as I am in good company here as well, I think that I shall linger a while.’

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Unfortunately, any enjoyment that Hannibal might have derived from this situation was quickly obliterated. For having made rather freely with the wine at dinner, Mason waited barely moments after the ladies had departed before launching into a tedious and ill-conceived diatribe against His Majesty’s armed forces.

‘Why they prefer to sit on their backsides and polish their brass buttons, rather than engaging with the enemy and wiping him out once and for all, I cannot fathom!’

‘By *him*, I presume you mean Bonaparte?’ clipped Will, rocking back in his chair and eyeing Mason with undisguised dislike.

Mason shrugged and beckoned for a refill.

‘To be sure, Bonaparte is the *head* of the snake; but a Frenchie is a Frenchie, whatever their position.’

‘Really, Mason,’ rapped out Hannibal. ‘You forget yourself. To generalise about an entire population is, to say the least, narrow-minded.’

Mason pooh-poohed the notion, downed his umpteenth glass and helped himself with an unsteady hand to yet another.

‘By all accounts,’ commented Sir James soberly, ‘the Russians have the French army on the run in any case.’

‘And we could have had some good, funny times helping them!’

At this, the faces of all those present wore expressions ranging from mild amusement – as in the case of Mr Graham – to the outright indignation of his son. And by the time the port supply was exhausted, so too was Hannibal’s patience.

‘Sir James, Mr Verger is unwell. I think it best that I escort him back to Muskrat Hall,’ he announced grimly, as Mason lolled, grinning, on his chair.

‘Yes, yes, of course.’ Sir James nodded vigorously. ‘That is much the best plan. I shall make your excuses to the ladies, and the rest of your party may borrow our carriage to return home.’

‘Most uncouth,’ sniffed Mr Franklyn.

And really, Hannibal could not but agree.

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With the help of Will and Mr Graham, he manoeuvred Mason outside and into their carriage.

‘Thank you. I am grateful to you both.’ Pushing back the hair which flopped over his forehead, he cast a withering glance at the man now slumped snoring against the far window. ‘At least there is now an end to his rhetoric.’

‘Yes, but he may prove troublesome to move at the other end,’ observed Mr Graham. ‘Will, why do not you accompany Mr Lecter back to Muskrat Hall and lend a hand?’

‘Why, I –’

‘An excellent notion,’ interrupted Hannibal, lest the nonplussed boy should protest. ‘And you shall, of course, stay the night.’

‘You can walk home in the morning,’ pronounced Mr Graham cheerfully. ‘Or send for the carriage if the weather proves inclement.’

‘No need,’ Hannibal said smoothly. ‘We had, in any event, planned a fishing expedition for tomorrow. I can deliver Mr Graham home afterwards.’

‘Well, then. It seems that all is well in hand.’

There was a definite twinkle in Mr Graham’s eye as he patted his son’s shoulder and walked away.

‘So it does.’

Will’s expression was unreadable, and for an instant Hannibal feared that the stubborn Omega would simply walk away from this further example of his ‘high-handedness’. But after several moments of silent contemplation, Will climbed into the carriage. And releasing his breath, Hannibal quickly followed suit.

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Of course, the plentiful supply of servants falling over themselves to help the ‘ailing’ Mr Verger to his room immediately made a complete nonsense of Will’s presence at Muskrat Hall. But what cared he for that when amber eyes caressed his face and the very air between them hummed with anticipation as they sat across from each other in the drawing room, sipping hot Negus?

‘I am sorry that I took you from your friends.’

‘Are you?’

Will offered a teasing smile and Hannibal’s eyes darkened.

‘In truth, no. But perhaps you are?’

Slowly, Will shook his head. ‘Besides, you did not *take* me anywhere. I came because I chose to.’

‘And for that I am very grateful.’

*Then why are you still sitting so far away?*

‘Hannibal.’ Will could hear the ache in his own voice, but desperation had finally overridden pride. ‘Come here. Please.’

His voice cracked on the final word and instantly Hannibal was on his feet. Crossing with swift steps, he knelt before Will and plucked the goblet from his fingers. He placed both drinks on the floor, turned back and regarded Will gravely.

‘Tell me.’

Will squirmed beneath the penetrating gaze. ‘Must I? Is not it clear enough?’

‘Will.’ Gentle hands cupped his jaw, a thumb tracing the line of his lower lip. ‘As in tune as I believe we are, I cannot read your mind. *Tell* me.’

Will shifted forward to bury his face in the crook of Hannibal's neck and looped trembling arms around his shoulders. Surrounded by his lover's heat and scent and strength, he felt afresh the pain of their separation and the months of uncertainty that had followed. Longing to speak his heart, he found that the words simply would not come. Until he felt an answering tremor pass through Hannibal's frame, and the Alpha pulled him fully into his embrace.

'Will,' he murmured achingly, a kiss of breath against his neck. 'Will.'

*He* does *still love me. He* does.

The realisation filled him with joy and fresh courage. Pressing close, Will rested his chin on Hannibal's shoulder and spoke softly.

'Firstly, I find that I am a very selfish creature; for no matter how irksome it is to you, I must again thank you for your kindness to my youngest sister. It pains me more than I can say that my family knows nothing of it.'

Hannibal sighed. 'If you *will* thank me, tiresome boy, let it be for yourself alone. Much as I respect your family, I believe I thought only of *you*.' The next moment, Will felt soft lips against his cheek. 'Secondly?'

Heart full, Will choked, 'Secondly, I do *not* wish us to be friends.'

'Oh? Why not?'

He pulled back at this, eyes fierce. 'Because if we were, I could not do *this*.'

And clasping Hannibal's face between his hands, he took the Alpha's mouth. Hannibal shuddered and opened to him immediately. They kissed deeply and they kissed long, hands roaming freely.

Feverish with want, Will pushed Hannibal back to lie atop him on the burgundy carpet. Kiss after tender kiss he bestowed, fingers working deftly to work free knots and buttons. His lips followed the path laid bare by his hands, and he felt with satisfaction Hannibal's harsh inhale as he brushed lightly across the apex of his lover's thighs. Overcome suddenly with emotion, he stopped and pressed his cheek against the warm skin of Hannibal's stomach, arms sliding possessively around his waist.

'It has been so long,' he groaned. 'All those months apart, I longed for you, Hannibal. *Ached* for you.'

He felt Hannibal's fingers stroking lightly through his hair, and pushed into the touch.

'I too. Every moment, Will.'

Will looked up, eyes fierce. 'I do not wish to be parted from you again.'

'Nor I, you.'

Every note of softness in Hannibal's voice, every tender glance, was balm to the soreness in Will's heart. He groaned.

'We have both been entirely stupid.'

Laughter coloured Hannibal's voice. 'I know of at least three people who would agree emphatically with that assessment.'

'As do I.' Will grinned, chin propped on Hannibal's stomach. 'It seems that we were the *last* to know.'

'And now that we do?'

'Well, since you ask…'

Boldly, Will wriggled down to kneel between Hannibal's legs, hands parting them wide. Hardly knowing what he was doing, driven only by the need to reclaim the Alpha as his own, he bent his head to mouth softly against the bulge straining the front of Hannibal's breeches.

A low growl rumbled through Hannibal's chest. 'Enough, wicked boy.'

Will flicked his eyes upward. 'You would deny me?'

'I would deny you nothing. Rather, I would give you everything.' And then, in a tone that sent shivers of delight through Will, 'In my bed, with nothing between us.'

'But what if I do not want to move?'

Eyes glinting, Hannibal sat up and tugged Will back into his lap. Will endeavoured to pout; but to his secret delight, Hannibal kissed the mulish expression from his face.

'I would not wish us to be observed by a passing servant, or by Mason, should he awaken. But there is something which I do want, very much.'

'Oh? And what might that be?'

Will's reluctant smile was met with another series of slow kisses, and both were decidedly flushed when finally Hannibal broke off to answer.

'You, my teasing Will. I want *you*, within me.'

As intimate as they had been during those few precious days at Ravenstag, this was new ground. And Will was consumed suddenly by the desire to lose himself within the hot darkness of his lover. His breath hitched.

'Hannibal, oh yes. Yes, please.'

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Furtive, dishevelled, they made their way upstairs, hands tightly clasped, a candle purloined from the drawing room lighting their way. Brimming with needful impatience, Will could barely wait until they were inside the richly-furnished bed chamber before dropping to his knees and pulling Hannibal towards him.

'I want to see you.'

A half-smile crooked Hannibal's lips, and he trailed gentle fingers down Will's cheek.

‘Then see me.’

*This* Will remembered well, and blissful tears slipped down his cheeks as he bared Hannibal to worshipful lips and tongue. Fingers burrowed into his hair, clutching tight, guiding and encouraging as warm, firm flesh pulsed and jerked beneath his attentions. But before long, he was tugged up and drawn back onto the bed.

‘Come, bewitching boy. I would have you inside me.’

And, oh, what joy to touch and scent and kiss. To bare them both completely and bring to writhing ecstasy, with fingers and tongue, the man who had, so many times during Will’s heat, done as much for him. Pinning the Alpha beneath him, caging him between strong thighs, Will peered at the slender glass bottle which Hannibal had pushed into his hand, and raised his eyebrows.

‘Should I ask why you have such a thing in your possession?’

This provoked another rumble of laughter. ‘We are not all blessed with your biology, Will.’

Will glared, red-cheeked. ‘You know perfectly well what I meant.’

But urgent want outweighed his desire to chastise, and carefully he removed the stopper to pour a little of the thick liquid into his cupped palm. He paused then and glanced anxiously at Hannibal.

‘Do I – is it as we –‘

It was absurd to feel suddenly shy; but as Will stumbled over the words, Hannibal reached for the bottle.

‘As we did before? Yes, my Will. Here, I shall show you.’

Pulse thrumming with delight at the endearments Hannibal was strewing like petals, Will forgot instantly his awkwardness. He watched, mesmerised, the languid demonstration, eager fingers taking over at Hannibal’s throaty instruction. And when at last he thrust deep his own oil-slicked sex, and Hannibal arched up with a groan, the pleasure was as nothing Will had ever known.

‘I feel you,’ he panted, withdrawing slowly and gripping Hannibal’s hips before pushing back in, ‘so warm and tight around me. How do I feel to you?’

Cheekbones smeared with colour, Hannibal curled a hand around Will’s nape and tugged him down for a kiss.

‘As if you are a part of me,’ came the reverent whisper against his lips.

‘Yes.’ Moving with ever-increasing urgency, Will strained closer, almost delirious in his need. ‘Yes, that was how it was for me. And I want – H-Hannibal, I want –‘

But his release tore through him before he could frame the words, his choked cries pressed into Hannibal’s skin.

They lay together, breathing as one, until it grew uncomfortably warm and sticky between them, and gently Will withdrew. He flung himself on his back beside Hannibal and pushed his hands through sweat-damp hair.

‘I would like very much to do that again someday.’

The deep, rich chuckle which this declaration provoked filled him with happiness, as did Hannibal’s murmured response.

‘I must say I find that notion most agreeable.’

Rolling onto his side, Will propped himself up on one elbow. ‘But I find myself wanting something else even more.’

‘Oh?’

‘Mm.’

He reached out with his free hand and pushed back the golden strands that had fallen across Hannibal’s eyes. His fingers traced the contours of his lover’s noble face, then down the strong column of his neck, and across his hair-dusted chest to play idly with his nipples. He had discovered at Ravenstag how much this pleasured Hannibal, and eagerly now he reclaimed the privilege. As the Alpha’s breathing became more uneven, Will leaned across him and replaced fingers with tongue, suckling with greedy relish. A fist in his hair tugged at him not ungently, and he blinked up slowly into eyes blown black as polished onyx.

‘Wait, my impatient Alpha. I am not near done.’

How he treasured the moans that were ripped from Hannibal when his hand drifted down to encircle the hot, hard length that jerked at his touch. And he felt his own arousal reignite as he flicked out his tongue to tease and taste.

Large hands clamped suddenly around his upper arms, and Will grinned as he found himself once again on his back. It was Hannibal’s turn now to loom over *him*, teeth bared.

‘You are exceptionally wicked.’

‘Am I?’ He cocked an insouciant brow. ‘What is to be done about that?’

‘I wonder.’ Ruthless fingers sought his core. ‘So very wet for me.’

Will keened and pushed into the touch. ‘Hannibal.’

Hannibal hummed, intoxicated by the sweet scent and sensuous writhing of his Omega.

‘Is this what you want?’

‘Y-yes.’

A fingertip traced the slick rim and dipped inside.

Will gasped. ‘Again.’

On impulse, Hannibal bent his head to pleasure with his tongue Will’s body – nipples red and pebbled, the slit of his swollen sex, his slick-drenched entrance. To feast again upon his love. It filled him with fierce satisfaction and he savoured every fretful sound, every high-pitched cry.

And wanted more.

‘Are you ready for me, Will?’

In reply, Will rolled onto his front and tilted his hips in wanton show. And reverently, Hannibal knelt, grasping with infinite gentleness Will’s slender waist, and pressing in. And it was as exquisite as the first time and all the times that had followed. Silken walls clutched and squeezed, fragrant slick easing the way. Will gasped and panted and undulated against him.

‘You feel so good.’ His voice sounded clogged with tears. ‘I have missed this. I have missed *you*.’

Curving over him, Hannibal buried his nose in Will’s sweat-sweet curls. There was so much that he wished to say, and words of love trembled on his tongue.

*I shall never again leave you. I adore you*.

But this new accord was fragile, as yet untested. Once before, he had spoken of love when neither had been ready. What heartbreak had then followed. How foolish he would be to commit such an error a *second* time. And so Hannibal swallowed the tender declarations. Better rather to *show* his devotion with hands and lips, to worship Will with his body.

As they moved together, his thrusts quickened, pleasure building in waves, though when he felt the pulsing of his growing knot, he tensed. But Will rubbed against it, whimpering.

‘Oh, please. Please, Hannibal.’

He exhaled harshly, forehead pressed to Will’s nape.

‘Will, I – are you certain?’

‘I am.’ A sob then, that tore at Hannibal’s heart. ‘Do not you want to?’

*My love. Yes*.

He cupped Will’s jaw, coaxing him round for a kiss. And as he tasted, so finally he claimed, penetrating deep, his burgeoning knot stretching the slick-soaked rim and drawing a gasp from Will as it slipped inside. And then, as he began again to move, ah, never had Hannibal felt such ecstasy. Surrounded by muscles which gripped and milked, all coherent thought was banished and pleasure, white hot and all-consuming, ripped through him. As his seed spilled hot and deep, he shuddered against Will’s shoulder, grazing the sensitive skin with his teeth.

‘Hannibal,’ groaned Will, neck arching in a perfect curve. Inviting. *Trusting*.

With utmost tenderness, Hannibal kissed the dewy skin beneath his lips.

*Not yet, my darling. But soon*.

If Will felt slighted, he showed no sign, twining his fingers through Hannibal’s as together they collapsed in an exhausted tangle of limbs. And when their bodies separated, Will turned at once within the circle of Hannibal’s arms and pressed close.

‘Shall I stay for a while?’

What fierce possessiveness welled within Hannibal as he returned the sleepy Omega's embrace.

'You shall stay all night. I would not countenance any other arrangement.'

A soft sigh fluttered against his neck. 'Good.'

They lay entwined until discomfort drove Hannibal to tug Will from the bed.

'Come, allow me to tend you. You are an unconscionable mess.'

Will snorted. 'No more than you.'

But there was no bite to his words, and Hannibal felt the soft stroke of a thumb across his palm as he led Will to the washstand in the corner of the room. He cleaned them both; and while he was perfunctory with himself, his touch gentled as he reached for Will. He could not resist anointing those pale, slender thighs with kisses, each one more lingering than the last, until he felt again Will's growing arousal and took him into his mouth, sucking eagerly to pull from the boy the high-pitched cries he so loved to hear.

When finally they were clean and dry, Hannibal pulled the sheets from the bed and threw the discarded coverlet across it.

'This shall have to suffice.'

He blew out the candle and they sank down together again, Will wriggling back into the curve of Hannibal's body in a most distracting manner. But sleep quickly claimed them, and not for several hours did either again stir.

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Will was awoken by a pale bar of sunlight shining across his face. Blinking, he struggled upright, and blushed as he registered an additional presence in the room – that of Umber, Hannibal's valet.

'Good morning, sirs,' intoned Umber blandly, busying himself with straightening the folds in the curtains.

Will's heart skipped a beat as long fingers trailed, feather-soft, down his spine.

'Good morning, Umber.' Hannibal's voice was husky. 'What time is it?'

'Seven o'clock, sir.'

'Is everything ready for our expedition?'

'It is, sir. Cook has prepared a basket, and your rods and tackle are outside. I thought you might like to take the phaeton, sir.'

'Very good.'

Umber bowed and exited, pulling the door softly to as he left. Twisting, Will met Hannibal's lazy gaze with raised brows.

'The phaeton?'

‘Mm.’

The hand on his back travelled lower and Will half-closed his eyes in pleasure.

‘Are not there streams enough within walking distance?’

‘I thought that you might like to choose our destination.’ Hannibal sat up and looped his arms around Will’s waist. ‘Perhaps show me the haunts of your childhood.’

Touched, Will turned his head and pressed a kiss to Hannibal’s cheek.

‘I would like that very much.’

***

In the cool silence of early morning, they stole outside like naughty children. The one-horse phaeton stood at the ready, and Will climbed aboard as Hannibal took the reins.

And so it was that an hour later, they stood side-by-side, fishing rods in hand, on the bank of Will’s favourite stream.

‘Over the years, my father and I spent many happy hours here,’ he reflected, watching as Hannibal cast off with admirable precision. ‘Although I must confess that we long ago stopped coming for the carp. They are exceedingly wily creatures.’

‘Ah.’ Hannibal darted him an amused glance. ‘A detail you hitherto neglected to mention.’

‘I thought that you might rather relish the challenge.’

Hannibal’s laughter mingled pleasingly with the symphonic sounds of early morning – the gurgle of water over stone, a skylark’s quavering soprano, desiccated leaves rustling overhead. And as they settled into a comfortable silence, Will felt a burst of happiness that curved his lips irrepressibly upwards.

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When the church bell chimed ten o’clock, they stopped for sustenance, having eschewed breakfast in favour of an early start. Once the rods were secured, they spread out their greatcoats and sat down, the basket between them.

Hannibal opened the lid, revealing various muslin-wrapped items, a corked earthenware bottle and two silver cups – at the sight of which, Will endeavoured not to roll his eyes.

‘We have bread, cheese, apples. And tomatoes from the greenhouse.’

‘And the bottle?’

‘Cider from one of the tenant farmers.’

At this, Will grinned. ‘How very thoughtful of them.’

It was with covetous eyes that Will watched Hannibal remove the cork and pour two generous servings of the cloudy, sweet-smelling liquid. Those beautiful hands knew how to give him

exquisite pleasure and he wanted them on him again, but he knew not how to ask.

Hannibal passed him a brimming cup, and their fingers brushed as he accepted it.

‘Thank you.’

‘It is my pleasure.’

They drank, exchanging lingering looks. *He feels it too*.

Encouraged, Will put down his cup and confessed softly, ‘I imagined this once. The two of us, here, together.’

‘You did?’ Hannibal looked touchingly pleased. ‘When?’

‘Oh, many months ago. Strangely enough, long before I realised that I –‘

He stopped abruptly, face burning.

‘Will?’

‘Never mind.’ Hastily, he reached for the bread. ‘We should eat before the food spoils.’

He endured Hannibal’s searching look, keeping his eyes on his task as he tore chunks from the oblong loaf.

*What were you thinking, almost blurting out your feelings in such a clumsy way?*

After a few moments, Hannibal joined him in dividing the food, and they ate in a silence that was slightly less comfortable than before.

But the cider warmed Will’s belly and relaxed his limbs. And when he picked from its muslin nest a plump tomato and bit into it, relishing the slight crunch before sucking out the juice, he glanced upwards and laughed at Hannibal’s struck look.

‘Do I horrify you with my provincial manners?’

‘Not at all, I assure you.’

There was a husky note in Hannibal’s voice that was deliciously familiar. And suddenly Will saw a way forward.

‘Would you like a taste?’

‘Very much.’ The huskiness was accompanied now by an inviting gleam in honey-dark eyes.

‘Here.’ Smirking, Will held it up to Hannibal’s lips. ‘It is very good.’

‘I am sure.’

Slowly, Hannibal bit into the offered fruit, holding Will’s gaze. A bead of red juice escaped and trickled down his chin. Will leaned across the basket, placing one hand on Hannibal’s shoulder for balance.

‘Allow me.’

He flicked out his tongue and caught the droplet as it hung suspended, then licked his way up delicately to Hannibal’s lips.

‘Better?’ he whispered.

Hannibal tilted his head as if considering. The next moment, the basket was pushed aside and Will found himself hauled into Hannibal’s lap, a strong arm wrapping around his waist as he plucked the tomato from Will’s fingers and tossed it away. Will framed Hannibal’s face with hands that trembled, and pressed their lips together as gentle hesitation gave way to fierce demand. He sucked the taste of sweet cider from Hannibal’s tongue, and moaned as Hannibal explored his mouth with equal thoroughness. Finally they parted, and Hannibal smiled.

‘Much better.’ He reached into the basket and retrieved a small cloth bundle. ‘I have something for you.’

And with a look that was almost shy, he held it out on his open palm. Will’s heart beat a little faster.

‘What is it?’

‘Unwrap it and see.’

Will reached between them and carefully peeled away the damp muslin. There, in the centre, nestled a delicately carved tomato rose, scarlet petals gleaming. A touching reminder of their days together in the hunting tower. He looked back up at Hannibal with a helpless smile.

‘Oh, Hannibal. It is beautiful. When did you find the time?’

Hannibal chuckled, a rich sound that was all the more precious for its rarity. ‘I count myself fortunate that you are an extremely deep sleeper.’

Carefully, Will plucked up the rose and cradled it for a moment before setting it gently aside.

‘Thank you.’

He slipped his arms around Hannibal’s neck and twined his fingers in the thick strands that brushed the top of the Alpha’s coat collar.

‘You need a haircut.’

‘Such impudence.’ Hannibal eyed him with amusement. ‘And from someone with the most appallingly unkempt mop I have ever seen.’

Yet the hand that stroked through Will’s hair lingered lovingly.

‘You, sir,’ whispered Will huskily, leaning forward until they were nose to nose, ‘are quite shockingly rude.’

‘Then I would say we are perfectly matched,’ came the soft reply, before their lips connected once more.

# Happy Endings

‘When we met again at Ravenstag, did you think I was pursuing you?’

Hannibal turned onto his side, propping himself up on one elbow. Surely, he thought, there could be no sight on earth lovelier than Will Graham in only breeches and shirt, head pillowed on slender arms, curvaceous bottom sticking provocatively in the air, biting a lip already swollen with kisses.

‘I would never have dared dream that I could be so fortunate. Besides,’ he chuckled, extending a finger to trace the length of the boy’s enchanting snub nose, ‘I was at the time convinced that you hated me.’

‘Hated you?’ Will frowned. ‘Not at all. Particularly after I had read your letter.’

‘Ah, the letter. At the time, I am sure I considered it perfectly reasonable, but in retrospect I am ashamed of having hectored you so. Did you destroy it?’

If anything, Will looked even more fierce. ‘Of course not! Hannibal, it was your letter that showed me how prejudiced I had been. How blind! I would that you knew how much it meant to me.’

Uncomfortable with Will’s defence of him, Hannibal sought solution in evasion.

‘*I* would that *you* were fully dressed again. You will catch your death if you remain so.’

‘Summer is barely over!’

‘It is the middle of autumn, Will.’

‘Tush.’ Will’s face took on a smug look. ‘Anyone would think that I had undressed *myself*. And there *you* are, looking as innocent as you please, with scarce a button unfastened. Shame on you, Mr Lecter.’

The only possible response to such insolence was, of course, a thorough kissing, which was brought to a hasty end by the sound of tuneless whistling coming from the woods just behind them.

Both jumped to their feet; and while Hannibal straightened his clothes and pushed back his hair, Will scrambled to redress, peals of laughter ringing out.

Hannibal folded his arms and endeavoured to look stern. ‘Will Graham, you have corrupted me utterly.’

But his heart had never felt so light.

***

The carp were no more co-operative *after* breakfast than they had been *before* it, though nobody could have been less concerned about that fact than Will. Indeed, if ever there had been a time when he had been happier, he could not recall it.

They packed away slowly; and when all was stowed in the phaeton, Hannibal went to untether the horse from beneath a nearby spreading oak. But on impulse, Will caught hold of his hand, staying him.

‘I thought perhaps you might like to take some exercise first, after standing for so long.’ And he glanced at Hannibal almost shyly. ‘These woods contain some beautiful walks.’

Hannibal’s lips curved upward and he touched Will’s cheek. The fleeting contact felt like a kiss.

‘I do not wish to part with you either, Will. By all means, a walk then.’

They followed a winding path which Will had trodden many times; yet with Hannibal beside him, everything seemed sharper, clearer. The leaves overhead tinted the sky in a fresco of ochre, and through them the sun shone benignly. It felt like a blessing.

‘How go your preparations for London?’

Hannibal’s question took Will by surprise. It had been many months since the subject had been raised between them. Not even at Ravenstag had they discussed it.

‘I must soon seek lodgings at Lincoln’s Inn, but my uncle will furnish me with the necessary books when he and my aunt visit for Christmas. He has insisted upon it.’

‘I am not surprised. Training for the law is no inexpensive business.’ After a moment, he added, ‘I shall miss you, Will. More than I can say.’

A short silence followed, during which Will wrestled with a multitude of emotions.

‘You do not plan on spending the winter in London, then, as you did last year?’

‘Last year, Mischa could not be at Ravenstag. And I could not be so far from Mischa.’

‘She was your inducement to stay,’ murmured Will bleakly.

He felt Hannibal’s earnest gaze. ‘I need no inducement to be wherever you are, Will. But duty demands that I tend to the estate for the foreseeable future.’

Will attempted a smile. ‘Perhaps we might write to one another.’

‘*Perhaps*? Will, you cannot think –’

The next moment, his hand was captured; and as they drew to a stop, he twined his fingers automatically with Hannibal’s, clinging with something akin to desperation.

‘I am not saying *goodbye*.’ Hannibal cupped his cheek, fingers warm against his skin. ‘How could you believe such a thing?’

Will covered Hannibal’s hand with his own, relief drawing the tension from him. ‘I did not wish to presume –’

‘But you should,’ returned Hannibal, almost imperiously. ‘I *want* you to.’

‘Why? Tell me *why* I should presume, Hannibal.’

A sound – half-laugh, half-groan – as his mouth was taken in a fierce kiss. When at length they broke apart, both were trembling.

‘Foolish boy.’ Hannibal’s tone was tenderly chastising. ‘Because I am *yours*, Will Graham. I have been since the day we met. I am yours completely and I am yours forever.’

The words – and the adoration in Hannibal’s gaze as he spoke them – rendered Will momentarily incapable of speech. He stroked back the hair from Hannibal’s forehead, eyes filled with wonderment.

‘You truly love me.’

Hannibal smiled. ‘Just a little.’

Will ignored the gentle tease, hungry to hear again the words which once he had rejected utterly.

‘Will not you tell me, then?’

Hannibal’s eyes darkened. ‘I did so once before, at a time when I was utterly unworthy of your regard.’

‘You had it anyway, you know. That very first day, I thought you the most beautiful man I had ever looked on.’ A helpless laugh broke from Will’s lips. ‘And then you spoke, and I thought you the most infuriating.’

At this, Hannibal stole from him another kiss, and eagerly Will returned it.

‘Tell me,’ he murmured as they stood twined together. ‘Please.’

‘Oh, my darling.’ Heart full, Hannibal pressed soft kisses to the curls at Will’s temple, the curve of his flushed cheek, the sweet uptilt of his lips. And with every kiss he sighed, ‘I love you. I love you. I love you.’

On a sob, Will’s lips opened to him, and they kissed with all the fervour of new lovers.

Afterwards, cheek against Will’s temple, Hannibal whispered, ‘l meant what I wrote in my letter.’

‘Without agenda?’

‘Or hope of return.’

It had been a solemn vow then, as now, but Will pulled back to pin him with incredulous blue eyes.

‘Hannibal, how can you not know?’ And on a choked laugh, ‘I love you, you fool. I love you to utter distraction.’

For an instant, he ceased to breathe. ‘You never said so.’

‘For much of our acquaintance, you never gave me *cause* to say so.’

A tender kiss removed the sting from the words.

‘How long have you loved me?’ Hannibal pressed, greedy for details, gathering Will more tightly in his arms.

Far from objecting, Will gave a happy sigh and burrowed closer still.

‘It has been coming on so gradually that I hardly know.’ He put his lips to Hannibal’s ear. ‘But I believe I must date it from my first seeing your beautiful grounds at Ravenstag.’

This, of course, necessitated another thorough ravishing.

***

They returned to Wolf Manor to find the house emptied of most of its residents. Mrs Graham, Fredricka and Molly were out paying a call on the Prices, while Alana and Miss Verger had gone into town to order wedding clothes. Will endeavoured not to blush at this information.

‘Father must be in his library. Come,’ and he tugged Hannibal towards the dining room. ‘Take tea with me.’

They sat close together on the dining room sofa, knees brushing as they sipped for a time in silence.

‘When do you leave Hertfordshire?’ Will was proud of the steadiness of his voice.

‘After Christmas.’ Hannibal stirred his tea slowly. ‘Mischa will join us here next month, and we shall travel back to Ravenstag in January.’

Will slipped his free hand into Hannibal’s. ‘Then we have some time.’

‘Yes.’

A question, unspoken yet of singular import, hung in the air between them. Will heard it between thundering heartbeats; felt it in the possessive clasp of their fingers. He took an unsteady breath.

‘If I dared, I would ask to come with you.’

‘What?’

Hannibal’s usual grace appeared to have deserted him. He stared, swallowed, shook his head.

‘But – your apprenticeship.’

‘To speak truth, I suspect that my uncle takes me on more for my sake than his own. He certainly has no shortage of employees; and his practice takes up so much of his time, I wonder that he has any spare to train me.’

‘You wish to give up the law?’

‘Not at all. But I do wish to be of *use* in the world, Hannibal. Of value. Besides, London is not the only place where I might learn my profession.’ Will looked at him searchingly. ‘I would speak with my uncle first – I should not wish to act precipitously. But if my suspicion is correct – well, perhaps *you* might know of a suitable situation for me.’

Hannibal’s grip tightened. ‘Will Graham, are you asking me to marry you?’

‘You may wish to consider carefully,’ warned Will with a smile, though his eyes grew damp at the expression of heartfelt delight which suffused Hannibal’s features. ‘Living with me every day, would not you soon tire of my insolence?’

Hannibal removed both cups, placed them carefully on the table, and then took hold of Will’s hand in both of his and brought it to his lips.

‘Every day, *forever*, Will, would not be time enough. The separations we have endured this past year have been sufficient torment.’

‘Yet you would have allowed me to go to London without you,’ Will could not help reminding him.

‘I would not for the world have kept you from what you most desired.’

Will laid a tender palm to Hannibal’s cheek. ‘*You* are what I most desire.’

Hannibal laughed. ‘How perfectly amiable you are being. I must accept your proposals more often.’

‘You have not actually accepted.’

‘You have not actually proposed.’

‘Have not I?’ Will quirked a brow. ‘How very remiss of me.’

He moved to kneel before his proud, exasperating Alpha and found that he was shaking. He laughed softly, apologetically.

‘Forgive me. I do not think that I am very good at grand gestures.’

His gaze was snared by eyes glittering with emotion.

‘I need no extravagant declarations from you, Will. You have already made me happier than I dreamed possible.’

Will swallowed. He reached out, cupping Hannibal’s face between his palms.

‘Then will you? Marry me? Be mine for always?’

And just as before, Hannibal replied first with a sweet press of lips, murmuring after each kiss, ‘Yes, Will. Always. Every day. Forever.’

***

‘We should speak to Father before Mama returns.’

Drowsy, contented eyes looked down into his, and Hannibal tightened his hold around Will’s waist, pulling the boy more tightly against him.

‘Soon. At the present moment, I do not care to move from this very comfortable sofa. I wonder,’ he mused, ‘what your mama will have to say about this.’

‘I would worry more about your aunt than my mama.’

Hannibal smiled into Will’s hair. ‘Not at all. It was Lady Bedelia who gave me reason to hope that you might still want me after all.’

‘Then she called on you before returning to Kent. I suspected as much.’

‘She did. And dwelt most emphatically on your refusal to give me up. I knew that had you been absolutely decided *against* me, you would have acknowledged it to Lady Bedelia, frankly and openly.’

Will’s shoulders shook, and laughter coloured his voice as he replied, ‘Certainly you know enough of my *frankness* to believe me capable of *that*.’

‘I would have you no other way.’

Lips quirking, Will dipped his head until they were nose to nose. ‘I shall remind you of that when your aunt and half your relations have disowned you.’

‘What care I for that?’ Hannibal murmured, gaze falling to that beautiful mouth. ‘I want none of them. *You* are my family, Will. You and Mischa and Robert. I need no other.’

They shared another slow, deep kiss before Will pulled away and tugged Hannibal to his feet.

‘Come. I want to make this official before your aunt barges in again and demands that I unhand you.’

***

His father listened with nary an interruption as Will stood before him, Hannibal at his side.

‘And when do you wish to marry?’ he asked at last.

‘That we have not yet discussed.’

Will glanced uncertainly at Hannibal, a little unnerved by his father’s reticence, and seeking reassurance. But Hannibal’s attention was fixed on his prospective father-in-law.

‘I see.’ Mr Graham leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers beneath his chin. ‘Mr Lecter, would you have the grace to step out for a moment? I should like to speak with my son alone.’

‘Father?’

Hannibal turned to him then. ‘It is perfectly alright, Will.’ And bowing to Mr Graham, he slipped quietly from the room, closing the door behind him.

Immediately, Mr Graham rose from his chair and walked around the desk.

‘Will,’ he said earnestly, stopping before him, ‘are you certain that this is what you wish?’

Will’s brow crinkled. ‘I do not understand, Father. I thought that you would be happy.’

‘Because I have on occasion encouraged you to spend time with him, hm?’

‘Well, yes.’

‘It is true that I have been guilty of a little matchmaking. I saw that Mr Lecter cared for you, and I pushed you together.’ Mr Graham shook his head. ‘But marriage is a serious proposition, Will. He is a rich Alpha, to be sure, but is that enough to make you happy? My child,’ and stepping forward, he grasped Will’s hands, ‘what of your feelings for him? You could not be happy in an unequal marriage. Please, my boy, let me not have the grief of seeing *you* unable to respect your partner in life.’

‘I *do* respect him,’ he replied, with tears in his eyes. ‘I *love* him. So very much, Father. Indeed, he is perfectly amiable. You do not know all that he is.’

‘Then tell me,’ urged Mr Graham gently. ‘I want only your happiness, Will, you must know that.’

And so Will told him. Of Hannibal’s history with Matthew Brown; of the trust and intimacy that had developed between them during Will’s heat; and finally of the service Hannibal had performed in saving Abigail from ruination.

Once more Mr Graham listened attentively, but this time his expression was very different.

‘Well,’ he said at last, ‘you have succeeded in surprising me.’ And he threw back his head and laughed. ‘So the man whom the whole town scrambled to worship is a fraud, while the one they rejoiced in reviling turns out to be a saviour. My, my. How the world turns.’

‘Father.’ Will laid a restraining hand on his arm. ‘Please do not mention the money to Hannibal. It would do no good in any case.’

Chuckling, Mr Graham patted Will’s hand.

‘I promise to be the soul of diplomacy. And doubtless when I *do* offer to repay him, he will rant and storm about his love for you, as young lovers are wont to do. And there will be an end to it.’

***

In pensive silence, Hannibal waited for Will’s return. He was extraordinarily relieved by the brilliant smile that lit up Will’s face as he entered the dining room, and they sat together on the sofa for several moments before either spoke.

‘I should like to speak with your father myself, to assure him that my intentions towards his son are entirely honourable.’

Will curled his hand around Hannibal’s nape, and Hannibal allowed himself to be drawn close.

‘You may, provided that you do not think of *claiming* me, or any other such Alphan nonsense.’

Hannibal rubbed his nose alongside Will’s, amused.

‘You do not wish me to claim you, then?’

‘Formally?’ Will snorted. ‘Absolutely not.’

‘Hm.’

‘But in private?’ He smiled slowly, slender fingers wreaking havoc with Hannibal’s senses as they stroked through his hair. ‘Certainly. Provided, of course, that I may claim *you* in return.’

‘Dearest, loveliest Will.’ Eyes half-closed, Hannibal sighed his contentment. ‘By you I have been properly humbled.’

‘Now that I doubt very much!’

***

It was not long after Hannibal left, with a warm handshake from Will’s father and a promise to return the following evening for dinner, that the rest of the family returned. Anxious to share his news first with Alana, Will felt with impatience every slow hour that passed until night finally came and he could steal his sister away. Her reaction, as they sat together in her room, was just as he had hoped.

‘Engaged to Mr Lecter! Oh, Will. At last! He shall be as dear to me as you and Margot.’

‘There, you see,’ he grinned, as they embraced warmly. ‘You will not, after all, have to shake the sense back into me.’

Returning to his own room some minutes later, Will noticed that his mother was still at her dressing table, and he seized the opportunity to deliver the news to her in private.

The effect of his communication was most extraordinary; for, on first hearing it, Mrs Graham sat quite still and was unable to utter a syllable.

She began at length, however, to recover; and the fidgeting, chuckling and exclamations which followed made Will very glad indeed that he had chosen to speak to her alone.

‘Mr Lecter! Who would have thought it? Oh, my sweetest boy, how rich you will be! What carriages you will have! Alana’s shall be nothing to yours. I am so happy! Such a charming man! So handsome! Three children married! Ten thousand a year!’

***

Dinner the following evening was not as trying an experience as Will had feared. His mother stood in such awe of Hannibal that she ventured only the most timid of greetings. Fredricka and Molly were similarly bashful; while Alana, though perfectly friendly, was understandably preoccupied in discussing wedding plans with Miss Verger. This left Hannibal free to talk at length with Mr Graham, and Will was relieved to observe how easily the two men conversed.

After dinner, Will suggested a walk before Hannibal’s departure; and after strolling for some time in quiet contentment, they found themselves at the summer house.

‘Come.’

Will allowed himself to be tugged inside and down into Hannibal’s lap, although instantly he adopted a severe expression.

‘Really, sir!’

Arms snaking around his waist, lips pressed to Will’s throat, Hannibal murmured, ‘Is not this gentlemanlike enough behaviour for you, Mr Graham?’

‘Mm.’ Squirming against him, Will slipped his hands beneath Hannibal’s coat. ‘I have no complaints.’

But the reference to their terrible argument in Kent gave him pause, and he pulled back slightly to look earnestly at Hannibal.

‘What I said to you that day –’

‘Was wholly justified.’

‘Hannibal.’ Tenderly, Will kissed the taut plane of his lover’s cheek. ‘I was guilty of dreadful prejudice when I spoke to you so harshly. And I have long been ashamed of myself for it.’

A smile twitched at the corners of Hannibal’s lips. ‘You are entirely charming and I am sure I have done nothing to deserve you.’

Feeling suddenly playful, Will cocked an eyebrow. ‘I am still surprised that you ever *wished* to deserve me. What set you off in the first place?’

With feigned puzzlement, Hannibal shook his head. ‘I really cannot say. You befuddled me so, I was in the middle before I knew that I had begun.’

In retribution, Will slipped his hand lower, fingers skating across the front of Hannibal’s breeches.

‘Now be sincere! Did you admire me for my impertinence?’

Hannibal growled, reaching down to still his teasing.

‘For the liveliness of your mind, I did.’

‘Ha. You may as well call it impertinence and be done. Confess and I shall allow a question in return.’ Eyes full of mischief, Will leaned forward and stole a fleeting kiss. ‘Quid pro quo, as we lawyers say.’

‘Oh, do you now?’ Hannibal smiled. ‘Very well then, appalling boy. I shall admit that I was very *much* struck by your impertinence.’

‘Because unlike the rest of the world, I did not seek to court you?’

But for this he received a light nip to his bottom lip.

‘Now, Will. Quid pro quo, remember?’

‘I am sorry.’ Will flicked him a flirtatious glance. ‘Please, ask away.’

‘Hm. Why were you so grave and silent when first I returned to Hertfordshire?’

Will’s cheeks heated. ‘Because I was embarrassed. Why did not *you* talk to me more when you came to dinner?’

‘A man who had felt less, might.’

With a sigh, Will laid his cheek on Hannibal’s shoulder.

‘I believe we must make a resolution to communicate more.’

He felt the soft press of lips against his hair.

‘Agreed. It might perhaps have been more convenient had at least *one* of us been better at such things from the beginning.’

‘Yes.’ Lifting his head, Will smiled tenderly. ‘But nobody thinks of *that* when they fall in love.’

# New Beginnings

Chapter Notes

To all of you who supported me through the past seven months of posting this fic, I give you my thanks and my love. To anyone coming fresh to it, I give you my gratitude. And to all the amazing, wonderful, beautiful Fannibals, I give you my warm, still-beating heart!

Dearest theseavoices, thank you from the bottom of my heart for your friendship and for all the stunning work you have done for E&A. I will treasure your illustrations forever.

And darling Purefoysgirl, you remain forever my inspiration.

I hope you all enjoy the final chapter of E&A. I'm sorry it took me so long to get it posted (I think I was procrastinating a little bit because I didn't want it to end!). But I've tried to make it worth the wait! And within it you will find one final stunning illustration by theseavoices!

Much love,

Teacup.

Happy for all her maternal feelings was the week in which Mrs Graham got rid of her two most deserving children.

The month leading up to the nuptials had passed in a flurry of organising, packing and letter-writing. But for Will, nothing had occurred to burst the delirious bubble of happiness in which he had floated, not even the prospect of Lady Bedelia's wrath.

*'Shall ever you have the courage to inform your aunt of what is to befall her, not to mention the shades of Ravenstag?'*

*‘I am more in want of time than courage, Will.’*

At length, of course, the letter had been written; and although Will had chosen not to enquire as to its contents, the grimness of Hannibal’s countenance as he had handed the sealed envelope to his valet had told him all that he had needed to know.

Mr Graham’s letter to Mr Franklyn had been composed in a somewhat different mood.

*Dear Sir,*

*I must trouble you once more for congratulations. Will is soon to marry Mr Lecter. Console Lady Bedelia as well as you can. But if I were you, I would stand by the nephew. He has more to give.*

*Yours sincerely, etc.*

And different again had been Will’s letter to his aunt.

*I must thank you both for taking such excellent care of Hannibal last week. He tells me that the partridge was cooked to perfection. And please convey my eternal gratitude to my uncle for not only accepting my defection with good grace, but also for finding me an excellent mentor in Derbyshire. Mr Gideon’s Bakewell practice, though new, has already a reputation for excellence, and its proximity to Ravenstag suits Hannibal and me very well.*

*By the by, you have my solemn word that next summer, the curricle is yours. You may tour the park to your hearts’ content.*

*With greatest affection,*

*Will.*

Mr Verger’s congratulations to both his sister and his friend on their approaching marriages had been all that was affectionate and insincere. He had managed, in his effusions, to avoid acknowledging Will at all, and had thereafter spoken to him as little as possible, a development that had suited Will very well.

***

And so it was that on the morning of Sunday the fifteenth of November, eighteen hundred and twelve, the small church on the edge of town which, in an average month, might play host to the odd funeral or christening, was by ten o’clock bustling with activity as the second wedding ceremony of the week commenced.

Standing in the vestibule, Will looked down at his left hand and the ring that adorned it, which Hannibal had slipped on his finger halfway through Alana and Miss Verger’s wedding breakfast. It nestled snug and heavy, a diamond surrounded by pearls, the design forming the shape of a flower. A rose. Delicate gold leaves framed the setting, and inscribed inside the band were the words ‘*Every day, forever*.’

*‘It was my mother’s. I had it inscribed when I was in London, and it can of course be resized if necessary.’*

*‘No, it fits perfectly.’*

*Tears blurred his vision and he blinked them away, lifting his hand to stare at the ring with wonder and a little sadness.*

*'It is beautiful, Hannibal. I only wish that I had something to offer you in return.'*

*He felt the comforting press of Hannibal's hand on his thigh.*

*'You have given me your love, Will. I could want no greater treasure than that.'*

There was a hush now inside the church. Expectancy hung heavy in the slightly chill air; and Will took a few deep breaths, adjusting the lay of his white silk neckcloth and checking his cuffs.

Coming to stand beside him, his father laid a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

'Dare I enquire how you are feeling?'

Will huffed in amusement. 'Well, I am not about to bolt, if that is what you mean. Actually, I feel surprisingly calm, considering that the last few weeks have been something of a blur.'

Mr Graham looked at him with his shrewd, kind eyes. 'This is a great change for you, Will. But you shall weather it. You are nothing if not adaptable.'

'I hope so.' Will's own eyes sought out the figure of the man who stood now before the altar, confidently tilted head unmistakable even from behind. A lump formed in his throat. 'I want so badly for him to be proud of me.'

'If he is half the man I suspect him to be, he is already, my boy.'

As if on cue, Hannibal turned, gaze searching. He stilled when he saw Will, and Will trembled at the look of fierce love written across his Alpha's countenance.

*I know, my darling, I know. I am coming. I am yours. Every day, forever.*

***

Afterwards, they walked hand-in-hand out of the church to the waiting curricle. It was a cloudless day, bright and frost-tinged. Everything seemed sharper and clearer; as if, Hannibal mused, the world had for the first time come into proper focus.

Someone had looped flowers through the rear of the chassis, and Hannibal's brows rose at the sight of matching garlanded hoops adorning the horses' heads.

'Crowns of flowers? This is Mischa's doing.'

'A logical assumption.' Will chuckled. 'She was, after all, responsible for this.'

He indicated Ripper, who trotted beside them with an air of wounded dignity, shaking his head vigorously every now and then as if in the vain hope of dislodging his floral collar.

The attendant groom removed the horses' feeding bags and checked their harnesses before relinquishing the reins to Hannibal. He bristled a little at the assumption that he would be the one to take charge; but Will, who had already climbed aboard, seemed not to have noticed. Mounting the steps, Hannibal took the whip from the groom's outstretched hand, a snap in his smile.

‘Be sure that the horses are well rested before their journey north. And do not tax them on the way. Firefly is accustomed to covering long distances, but Winston is not.’

‘Yes, sir. Very good, sir.’

The groom stepped back nervously; and when Hannibal glanced at Will, he found himself the object of bemused inquiry.

‘Is everything alright?’

‘Of course.’ Softening instantly, he offered the reins to his new husband. ‘Would you care to drive us back to Muskrat Hall?’

Will took the looped coils of leather and grinned up at him.

‘You trust me to get you there in one piece?’

‘I trust you with my life, Will Lecter-Graham. Certainly I trust you to control two stubborn horses.’

‘Not as stubborn as their owners, I think.’

At that, Hannibal grinned back.

*Will Lecter-Graham.* The newness of it tasted sweet on his tongue. *My husband. My life.* And he saw the same joyful recognition reflected in the shining blue of Will's gaze.

'Then you should manage splendidly. Onward, if you please.'

Will's eyes flicked to the whip in Hannibal's hand and he cocked a mischievous brow.

'Yes, sir. Whatever you say, sir.'

Mindful of the fact that the guests were now crowding out of the church to see them off, Hannibal attempted a chastising frown, but it was no use. He was, he admitted to himself ruefully, far too deeply in love to mind any more Will's public teasing. And in point of fact, this particular game offered a surprising amount of pleasurable anticipation...

***

The wedding breakfast, which Margot had insisted should be held at Muskrat Hall as her own had been, was a lively affair. Bread, meat and fish, served on silver trays, provided ample sustenance for the hungry guests who, once the wedding cake had been served, took to milling about, swapping seats with nary a care for decorum as they exchanged family news and town gossip.

And Hannibal cared not a jot.

His eyes sought out his new husband for the dozenth time since Will had left him to go and speak with Mrs Franklyn. They were talking earnestly, though Will smiled as he took his leave of her, and Hannibal was unsurprised to discover what the main topic of their discourse had been.

'I take it my aunt has received my letter.'

'Oh yes.' Will slid into his seat, shooting Hannibal a dry look. 'And I gather that you did not hold back in expressing your feelings.'

'After the audacity of her attempted interference? Certainly not.'

'Well, evidently her wrath was such that Mr Franklyn thought it politic to remove himself and Beverly from Kent for a time. I would not be surprised if they stayed at Price Lodge until January.'

'We shall be in Italy by then. And at Ravenstag before that.' Hannibal reached for Will's hand. 'Am I being very selfish, removing you so far from your family and friends?'

Before Will could reply, a pair of slender arms wrapped around Hannibal's neck and a shrill, high voice demanded, 'What is it you are talking of? I must have *my* share in the conversation!'

'Mischa, really.'

His sister, fresh and pretty in her flower-sprigged muslin gown, giggled and released him.

'That was an excellent imitation,' pronounced Will, raising his glass in salute. 'It is almost as if Lady Bedelia were here with us.'

'Thank you, *brother*. Although what a frightening prospect!'

Where once Hannibal might have felt annoyance at such indiscreet frivolity, now his heart remained stubbornly light at the sight of his two most beloved people enjoying each other's company. Mischa, laughing, moved on to join Molly, Fredricka and Brian, and Hannibal smiled and shook his head.

'She grows increasingly impossible. And I do not think I need to look far for the cause.'

Will's fingers laced through his as he bent his dark head to Hannibal's.

‘You have found me out.’ And, in a breathy whisper, ‘Tell me, sir, if I surrender, will you be merciful?’

On a swift indrawn breath, Hannibal squeezed his audacious husband’s hand in warning.

‘In this moment, yes,’ he growled, turning just a little so that their breaths mingled, ‘as formality demands it. But *tonight*, my incorrigible love, may well be a different matter.’

Will chuckled. ‘How promising.’ He grew then momentarily serious, murmuring tenderly, ‘And the answer to your question is no. It is *I* who am the selfish one, for I cannot wait to have you all to myself.’

The intimate moment was interrupted as Robert, seated at the head of the table between Mrs Graham and Mrs Crawford, stood up to make a toast.

‘In becoming one, these dear children have embarked on a grand adventure,’ he beamed, ‘and so I ask you all to join me in wishing them the best of times in their new life together.’

‘Bravo!’ Anthony sprang to his feet, glass in hand. ‘Put with your usual eloquence, Uncle. I would only add that I am very glad my cousin came finally to his senses. To Will and Hannibal.’

All the guests rose to echo this cheerful toast, though some seemed more enthusiastic in their salutes than others. Mr Cordell wobbled a little on his feet; Mr Franklyn peered anxiously at the door, as if the audacity of the occasion might at any moment summon his thunderous patroness from thin air; and Mason, the last to stand, sipped half-heartedly and sulked splendidly.

Hannibal saw all this and dismissed it instantly. What mattered was his uncle’s look of pride, the tears of joy in his sister’s eyes, his best friend’s happy smile. And the beautiful Omega whose hand he carried now to his lips.

‘To you, my Will,’ he whispered.

Will’s eyes glimmered with reflected emotion. He turned his palm to cup Hannibal’s jaw and leaned close again until their lips almost met.

‘To us.’

***

November and December were a blur of parties, calls and receptions, first in Hertfordshire and then Derbyshire.

From the wedding reception, Robert Lecter departed for a tour of the Far East, promising upon his return to sojourn at Ravenstag for at the least a month.

Mischa, in the weeks preceding the wedding, had spent a great deal of time with Molly; and as the day of their parting drew near, she grew increasingly fretful. Will, who saw that this attachment was mutual, suggested that Mischa stay on in Hertfordshire for a time and then bring Molly to Derbyshire for Christmas, a proposal to which Mr Graham was only too happy to accede.

Mrs Graham was in ecstasies. With three children disposed of, and the prospect of a fourth in Fredricka and Brian’s growing closeness, the business of her life was all but satisfied. Almost overnight, the parental worries of twenty years vanished, along with much of her overbearing

fretfulness. Thus, even if it was the case that she harboured secret hopes for Molly's friendship with Miss Lecter, she kept them for once to herself.

Alana and Margot detached themselves with speed from the malevolent presence of Mason and the dour Cordells, purchasing in the New Year an estate in Derbyshire that was situated a mere five and a half miles from Ravenstag. Deprived of the company of his only sensible sister - not to mention his one-time would-be paramour - and resigned to, at best, semi-permanent exile from Hannibal's sphere, Mason quit Hertfordshire for London. It was not long before his excesses drained much of what was left of his fortune, and he would have faced destitution had not Margot taken pity on him and set him up in a modest property on the fringe of fashionable society.

As for Matthew Brown and Abigail, their manner of living was unsettled in the extreme. They were always moving from place to place in quest of a cheap situation, and always spending more than they ought. The congratulatory letter which Will received from Abigail on his marriage was to this effect:

*My dear Will,*

*I wish you joy. If you love Mr Lecter half as well as I do my dear Matthew, you must be very happy. It is a great comfort to have you so rich and I hope that you will think of us. Our present situation is not so grand as I would wish, but three or four hundred a year would secure a place much more to my liking. However, do not speak to Mr Lecter about it if you would rather not.*

*Your loving sister,*

*Abigail.*

As it happened that Will had *much* rather not, he endeavoured in his answer to put an end to all further such entreaties. What assistance he could give from his *own* purse, he would, but he was determined that Hannibal should never again be troubled by dealings with Matthew Brown.

With the Crawfords, they were on the most intimate terms. The high regard in which Hannibal held them was for Will a source of constant joy. And they were both sensible of the warmest gratitude towards the couple who, by bringing Will into Derbyshire, had been the means of uniting them.

Will's only remaining regret was the bad blood that existed between Hannibal and Lady Bedelia. As insufferable as she undoubtedly could be, family was family, and his own acute state of happiness rendered his feelings towards her much more charitable than had hitherto been the case. Once settled at Ravenstag, therefore, he wrote to her in tones of conciliation if not apology - for never would he apologise for the terrible crime of loving her nephew.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, he received no reply to his letter; but then, in the first week of December, something wholly unexpected occurred. Anthony arrived in Derbyshire armed with a dozen presents, two letters from Robert bearing exotic postmarks, and one rather subdued aunt.

Whether her resentment had given way to her affection for Hannibal or her curiosity to see how Will conducted himself behind the now-polluted shades of Ravenstag, Lady Bedelia had condescended to call on them, and for the present that was enough. She stayed a fortnight, found fault with hardly anything, and spoke pleasantly to Will at least thrice.

On the final morning of her visit, she rose early and was pleased to be escorted to her carriage by both her nephews. Will, who walked a little way behind with Ripper, was amused by the cursory

wave he received, and returned it in kind.

‘I am sorry to have missed dear Mischa. When do you expect her?’ enquired Lady Bedelia, as Anthony handed her into the carriage.

‘In two days,’ replied Hannibal, shutting the carriage door with a firmness that caused Will’s lips to twitch. ‘Since the wedding, she has been staying with Will’s family in Hertfordshire.’

‘In *Hertfordshire*?’ repeated the incredulous lady, for all the world as if she had just been informed that her niece had been living in the wilds of some remote jungle. She would, perhaps, have said more, but the dangerous glint in Hannibal’s eyes did not go undetected, and whatever further thoughts she had on the subject went unsaid. Will stroked Ripper’s head and smiled to himself.

*She is learning.*

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*One month later.*

The corridors of the Uffizi palace gallery rang with the clacking of boot heels on tile, with the occasional cessation as the two elegantly-clad gentlemen paused to study a Rubens or a Raphael.

‘I am so glad that you brought me here,’ murmured Will, voice lowered despite the fact that they appeared to be the sole patrons. ‘The very walls are soaked in history. Can you feel it?’ He pressed a palm to the smooth yellow stone. ‘As if those who came before have left their imprints, like shadows.’

Hannibal smiled, as ever fascinated by the workings of his Omegan husband’s mind.

*Pure empathy. Beautiful.*

He covered Will’s hand with one of his own.

‘Alas, I cannot experience the Uffizi as you do, my love, although certainly I can appreciate the aesthetic that time and wealth have created. The Medicis were the ruling power in Italy for three hundred years. This is all that remains of their legacy.’

He felt Will’s hand shift beneath his, fingers spreading to interlock with his own.

‘Thank you for sharing it with me.’

Unable to resist, Hannibal stepped closer until their bodies touched, and leaned in to press a kiss against Will’s smooth cheek.

‘I have long wished to do so.’

‘Hannibal.’ Will twisted away, a delicate shade of pink blooming on his face. ‘In public?’

‘Gracious, how prudish you have become,’ teased Hannibal. ‘Whatever happened to the nymph who was ready to shed his clothes at every given opportunity - *in public*?’

‘That is a gross exaggeration,’ huffed Will, seeming torn between embarrassment and amusement, ‘and not at all the kind of joke that I would wish to have overheard!’

With lazy satisfaction, Hannibal enquired, ‘Do you see anyone else here?’

‘As a matter of fact, no.’ Will glanced to left and right before pinning Hannibal with stern blue eyes. ‘Not even a guide. Please tell me that you did not have the Uffizi gallery closed for our visit.’

‘Only for an hour.’ Shushing Will’s protestations, Hannibal grasped his hand and tugged him towards an open archway on their right. ‘Come. Here is what I wished particularly for you to see.’

Having pictured this moment many times in his mind, Hannibal had half-feared that the reality would not match his imaginings. He need not, however, have worried. Will stopped in the archway and his beautiful mouth formed a perfect ‘O’ as he gazed for the first time on La Primavera.

‘It is exquisite.’ Will released Hannibal’s hand and walked forward, seating himself on the wooden viewing bench, eyes riveted to the canvas. ‘Like a beautiful nightmare.’

‘Exactly.’ Coming to sit beside him, Hannibal smiled at his beloved. ‘I knew that you would understand.’

He lifted Will’s hand to his lips, bestowing a kiss on the ornate ring that rested now beside a smooth, slim circlet of gold.

Will turned to him, eyes alight with a quizzical tenderness. ‘You and I think alike about many things. Strange that it took so long for us to recognise how well-matched we are.’

‘And yet I recognised you the moment we met,’ mused Hannibal. ‘Somehow I knew, even then, that we were destined to be in each other’s lives. It shames me to recall how resistant I was to that truth.’

Will’s fingers curled comfortingly around his own. ‘It was the same for me.’ With a sigh, he leaned his head against Hannibal’s shoulder. ‘I was terribly drawn to you from the first, yet I was determined to dislike you, as I believed you disliked me.’

Will’s scent, the softness of his curls against Hannibal’s cheek, the warmth of his body pressed close - all were far more entrancing than any mere painting, and with Botticelli forgotten, Hannibal turned to cup Will’s face between his hands.

‘My darling boy, what fools we both were.’

It took the mere flicker of Will’s eyes to his mouth for Hannibal to draw immediately forward. With gentle insistence, he kissed Will’s lips apart, and closed his eyes on a sigh when he felt slender fingers thread through his hair to pull him closer still. So lost was he in the pleasure of the moment that it was several seconds before he registered the discreet cough of the museum guide, whose arrival signalled the end of their special tour.

Despite his earlier reticence, Will felt nothing but frustration at the interruption, although he offered a smile of apology to the embarrassed-looking man, a rotund Beta of perhaps five-and-fifty.

‘We are recently married,’ he explained, and immediately the guide was wreathed in smiles.

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The calm of the morning had given way to blustery showers, and at the door they were offered the loan of an umbrella. Will shook his head.

‘Thank you, but no. We do not have far to go.’

He almost laughed aloud at Hannibal’s dismayed expression; but to his husband’s credit, he merely jammed his hat onto his head and took Will’s hand in a firm grip.

‘Then we had better go quickly.’

From the shelter of the rain-lashed portico they ran, down the narrow, pillar-lined courtyard, as peeking statuary observed their flight with expressions of hauteur. On either side, the towering wings of the Uffizi offered little protection, so that by the time they reached the open space of the Piazza della Signoria, both Will and Hannibal were quite thoroughly soaked. Luckily, there were few people about to witness their drenched states, and beneath a glowering purple sky they hurried back to the apartment that was to be their home for the next month.

So late had been their arrival the previous night, Will had hardly done more than glance about him before they had tumbled into bed and fallen, wrapped around each other, into a deep slumber. He had been left with an impression of outrageous opulence, a far cry from the modest grace of Ravenstag. Yet somehow, in this setting, the extravagance of gold cornices and scarlet carpeting seemed wildly romantic rather than unspeakably vulgar.

The salon fire had been lit in preparation for their return; and after pulling off his boots in the foyer, Will crossed the room to stand before the crackling flames, shivering slightly. Instantly, Hannibal was at his side.

‘Come, we must remove these wet clothes without delay.’

‘A fine excuse to undress me,’ teased Will. ‘What of the servants?’

‘They are quartered on the floor below, should we require them.’

‘How convenient.’ Turning, Will began unbuttoning Hannibal’s sodden greatcoat, albeit with no little difficulty, for his fingers were almost numb. ‘Yet I believe we should be able to manage the task between us, do not you think?’

‘I would say so. Though perhaps the bedchamber would be a more suitable venue.’

Hannibal’s voice had dropped to a velvety purr. He shrugged out of his own coat, then helped Will off with his.

‘If you like.’ Casting his husband a demure look through his lashes, Will slowly removed first his tailcoat and then his waistcoat, dropping them one by one at his feet. ‘But I would be content to remain here.’

‘Would you, indeed?’ Hannibal grasped him around the waist and pulled him close. ‘Scandalous boy.’

‘Oh, how you do love to pretend to modesty,’ snorted Will, though his arms wound immediately around Hannibal’s neck, and he tugged him down for a hungry kiss. Warmer now, with the fire at his back and the heat of Hannibal’s Alpha body pressed to his front, he longed suddenly to feel only skin between them. He broke away to pull his shirt from his still-damp breeches, and in one quick motion drew it up and off.

Hannibal began mouthing kisses down his neck, and Will tipped his head to one side with a sigh of pleasure. Seeking fingers trailed down his back and round to his sides, then up to stroke gently across his peaked nipples. He squirmed, wanting more, wanting Hannibal's mouth. And as if he knew, Hannibal dropped to his knees, lips latching on to suck, tongue tasting and teasing. Will arched and gasped beneath his attentions, holding that golden head close to his chest even as the sensations became unbearably exquisite. He felt the slickness between his thighs even as its scent permeated the air, but he felt no embarrassment, particularly as its effect on Hannibal was gratifyingly immediate.

'Bedchamber, now.'

'Yes, sir.'

Hannibal stopped only to strip himself of all but his breeches, then reached again for Will. Clinging on delightedly, Will allowed himself to be hoisted up, and he wrapped his legs around Hannibal's thighs as he was carried through to their room. A fire had been lit there too, and the small chamber was nicely warmed. Hannibal sat down on the edge of the bed, and Will pulled back slightly to stroke greedy palms across the hair-roughened planes of his husband's chest.

'What would you have me do now?'

'Do?'

'To please you.' A coquettish smile accompanied the words.

'As an Omega pleases their Alpha?' Hannibal cradled Will's face between his hands, gaze searching. 'You know that I would never ask that of you, Will.'

The smile faded on a flicker of uncertainty. 'Because you do not want me in that way?'

Hannibal tutted, though his dark eyes held only tenderness. 'I want you in *every* way, as well you know. It is *you*, my love, who have been fearsomely vocal on the subject of Omegan expectations.'

The kiss that followed was reassuring, yet still doubt lingered.

'But you have not - *we* have not -'

'What?'

But Will could not say it, and frustrated by his own reticence, he sought a different approach. With a shove, he unbalanced Hannibal and sent them both tumbling onto the bed. A laughing gasp was all that he allowed to escape from Hannibal's lips before he smothered them with his own, twisting atop him, relishing the feel of the swelling hardness that pulsed against his. Hannibal's hands clamped onto his bottom, holding him fast as he growled low in his throat.

'I shall have you, my fierce Omega. I shall have you this very moment.'

How quickly then did passion overcome hesitation. Breeches and stockings were pushed down and off with hands that trembled, until both were naked, coming together again to rock against each other in frantic rhythm, exchanging ever deeper kisses; and when Hannibal rolled Will beneath him and imprisoned his wrists to push them up above his head, Will could only pant out one word, over and over.

‘Now. Now, now.’

So many times over the last months they had delighted in drawing out their lovemaking, in bringing each other to the brink of ecstacy only to pull back, prolonging pleasure almost to the point of pain. But the desire that burned between them now allowed for no such playfulness. Will felt it as an intolerable ache, a feverish demand to take and be taken. Not since his heat had he experienced such fretful need. And so intense was the feeling of relief when finally Hannibal lifted Will’s hips and pushed inside him, Will threw back his head and sobbed. Eyes darkly intent, Hannibal drove deep, an act of possessive love that Will’s Omegan nature thrilled to. But there was in his acceptance no meek submission - he bucked and writhed and pushed back, fingernails scoring into Hannibal’s shoulders as he was penetrated by that wonderfully hot, swollen knot. Swiftly the breathing of both became fractured, hips moving faster, hands clutching more tightly. Chasing sweet completion together.

On the brink, Will arched his back, legs wrapped tightly around Hannibal’s waist, and he almost wailed when Hannibal dipped his head and licked first one erect nipple and then the other. Up then to Will’s collarbone, and further, tongue following the path of glittering beads of perspiration. Until he settled at the juncture of neck and shoulder, and set to sucking the skin stretched taut over Will’s sensitive mating gland. In an agony of want, Will waited for the claiming bite that would surely follow, but when Hannibal lifted his head to brush a kiss along his jaw instead, he jerked away.

‘Will?’

‘What?’ he snapped, seething with frustration and no little amount of hurt.

But Hannibal only held him more tightly. ‘Tell me.’

Will glared at his husband through a mortifying sheen of tears, aching with frustrated need. ‘You *know*, Hannibal. You know what I want. What I have wanted for months. I thought that perhaps you were waiting until we were here alone.’ He laughed bitterly. ‘But it seems not.’

‘You think that I do not wish to bond with you?’ A flash of pain dulled the brilliance of his eyes. ‘When I am buried inside you and *still* it is not close enough?’

A whimper escaped Will’s lips, and he lifted a hand to Hannibal’s cheek. ‘Then why do you deny me? Deny *us*?’

Hannibal’s gaze was earnest. ‘I have no wish to deny you, only to know that you are certain.’

‘Why would you even ask such a thing?’

‘Will, you would be bound to me forever.’

Will clicked his tongue in annoyance and attempted to wriggle away, a token gesture given their situation but he was held fast in any case. He settled for an annoyed pout.

‘Are you attempting to rid yourself of me?’

‘Does it feel as if I am?’

The slow circling of Hannibal’s hips drew from him a gasp.

‘You do not play fair, sir.’

A smile chased the shadows from Hannibal's eyes. 'I play to win, Mr Graham.'

'Lecter-Graham,' shot back Will, though his former tension had melted away, to be replaced by a much more pleasurable sensation. Hannibal *did* want to bond with him. He needed only a little coaxing. And that, Will knew, he could do very well. He reached down between them and stroked himself slowly, catching his lip between his teeth as he gazed reproachfully at Hannibal. 'Please, my darling. Do not make me wait any longer.'

Hannibal's breath hissed between his teeth and he withdrew a little, only to thrust quickly and shallowly once, twice, and again. Will moaned, the sweet graze against his most sensitive spot exciting him once more to feverish want. He sought to touch himself again, but long fingers enclosed him first.

'You, my boy,' whispered Hannibal silkily, 'are a manipulative menace.' His thumb rubbed over the sticky red tip and Will arched his back again, a whine escaping his parted lips.

'It is a good thing that you love me as you do, then,' he panted. And received in retaliation a squeeze that caused him to shudder with pleasure.

'I love you to quite appalling excess,' affirmed Hannibal sternly. 'It is most inconvenient.'

'My poor love. Let me make it better.'

Reaching up, Will curled his hands around Hannibal's sweat-damp nape and tugged him down for a fervent kiss. His thighs tightened around his husband's lean waist, a silent demand for *more, all, now*.

Conversation was abandoned, bodies moving urgently together. And how easy it seemed then, how natural, for Hannibal to grasp Will's jaw and tilt it up; for his mouth to fit into the exposed curve of milky skin, setting sharp teeth to salty flesh. One moment more, just one, waiting for his darling to tense and cry aloud as he spilled hot between them. The siren call that Hannibal could resist no longer, his own shattering release made all the sweeter as he bit down in a savage kiss.

Later, much later, after mingled tears and languid kisses and a murmuring of vows renewed, they lay together, fingers laced, and looked up through the skylight at the winking stars.

'There is Jupiter.'

'Where?'

Hannibal pointed, tracing the air. 'And just above and to the right -'

'Orion.'

'Yes. See, Will? I told you that our stars would always be the same.'

'So you did.'

He heard the smile in Will's voice, and felt with wonder his mate's contentment, the reverberations of the emotion a beautiful echo, filling the empty space within that he had not even known had existed before this. Before *them*.

'I know.' Will squeezed his hand. 'It is strange to have *you* inside *my* head too.'

With a chuckle, Hannibal turned onto his side, propping himself on his elbow, and pushed back the flopping curls from Will's eyes.

'We still cannot read each other's thoughts, you know.'

'Thank heaven!' replied Will with an arch look. But his blue eyes were searching. 'And yet there is no going back now. We are conjoined.'

'And because of that I am the happiest I have ever been in my life. You must not doubt me any more,' reproved Hannibal gently.

'I do not doubt your love, Hannibal. It is only…'

Hannibal waited, continuing to stroke Will's hair. He had learned patience from his beautiful Omega, and he sensed that this was a crucial moment in which to exercise it.

When Will continued, his words were barely audible. 'What if I cannot bear children?'

Hannibal opened his mouth and closed it again, completely taken aback. But he saw that he *must* speak, for Will's anxiety was rising, and he felt it like a cold touch.

'Well,' he replied slowly, knowing that only honesty was possible between them now, 'I cannot say that it would not disappoint me, for the thought of a child with blue eyes and impossible curls - and, no doubt, an impossible temperament to match - fills me with joy.'

The mere fact that Will did not snort dismissively or issue a stinging retort on the indictment of his character was enough to stir Hannibal to reassurance.

'But if it cannot be *your* child, then believe me when I say that I would want no other. Unless, of course, we chose to take as our own an orphan. But that would be *our* decision, not mine.'

He bent and brushed a kiss across Will's warm lips. They clung for a moment, but he lifted his head again, determined to discover the reason for the curious question.

'Why do you ask such a thing, my darling?'

Again, Will regarded him with trepidation. 'After you returned to Hertfordshire, and we were - together, we - you - and I wondered…'

It took several moments for Hannibal to fathom Will's meaning, and when he did, a grin broke across his face.

'Oh, my delightful blushing husband! You mean that you have been worrying because I knotted you?'

'Well, yes.'

'Then and *many* times since?' he could not help but tease, and received in retaliation a light slap on his bottom.

'*Yes*, Hannibal.'

He chuckled but relented. 'Outside of a heat, knotting results in pregnancy only rarely, Will.'

‘Oh.’ The relief that washed through Will filled his eyes with tears. He wiped at them hastily. ‘I did not realise.’

‘Then the idea of having our child appeals to you?’

They exchanged smiles.

‘You know it does.’

A small, earnest child with golden hair and eyes of amber hue. It would, of course, be many months before Will’s next heat, but that mattered not at all. They had each other, and for the foreseeable future that was more than enough.

Hannibal bent to kiss him again.

‘What shall we do tomorrow?’

He considered for a moment, content to follow Hannibal’s lead and lighten the mood between them.

‘Perhaps Il Duomo? You have spoken of it so often, I would love to see its treasures.’

‘Then to Il Duomo we shall go.’ They shared another lingering kiss. ‘And perhaps next year, should we return, we could venture further abroad. There is a Norman chapel in Palermo that I believe would interest you very much.’

The prospect of the year to come - and of all the years that would follow that one - stole Will’s breath. A lifetime of love lay spread before him, and for a moment he felt quite unable to speak.

When finally he had recovered his voice, he asked huskily, ‘What about you, Mr Lecter? What would *you* wish to do?’

‘Lecter-Graham,’ replied his husband promptly. ‘My only wish is to make you happy, Will.’

Touched beyond words, Will tugged him down into a tight embrace. And fiercely he whispered against his husband’s cheek, ‘You shall not spend all your days indulging me, my stubborn Alpha. Besides, your wish has been granted already. I am happy. Supremely, ridiculously happy.’

‘You shall be,’ vowed Hannibal, pulling back and stroking the curls from Will’s face, dark eyes full of love. ‘Tomorrow and the day after that. And every day thereafter.’

‘Every day,’ echoed Will, feeling fresh tears slide from the corners of his eyes to dampen the pillow beneath. But his smile was luminous. ‘We both shall be, my love. Every day, forever.’

And, of course, they were.

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